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ABSTRACT

The qualitative study described in this document presents Virginia teachers' perceptions on 10 factors that influence their work environment: resources/instructional materials; physical facilities/class size; professional development; teacher-teacher interactions; teacher-administrator interactions; teacher-student interactions; school-parent/community interactions and involvement; school goals and objectives; school decision making and change; and personnel policies. Working conditions described by teachers who participated in regional focus group interviews varied greatly; however, with few exceptions, these teachers expressed dissatisfaction with such conditions as overcrowding, climate control problems, and poorly organized instructional space. They emphasized the importance of professional interactions with their colleagues and principals, noting that the quality of interactions with their principals had the greatest impact on the quality of working conditions. Recommendations for policy and practice to improve working conditions, a bibliography listing 48 references, and four appendices (Survey of Teachers' Satisfaction with Working Conditions; a Focus Group Moderator's Guide; a Virginia regional map; and a copy of an invitation to focus group interview participation) complete the document. (LL)

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Surviving the Worst, Expecting the Best:

Teacher Perceptions of Work Life in Virginia Schools

A Joint Study by the

Virginia Education Association
116 S. Third Street
Richmond, VA 23219

and

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P. O. Box 1348
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November 1991

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A Joint Study by

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Virginia Education Association
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P. O. Box 1348
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November 1991

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Executive Summary

Teaching and learning do not take place within a vacuum, they occur within a context. In the case of teaching, an array of factors contributes to this context. Ultimately, the positive and negative aspects of the teaching environment enhance or hinder teacher effectiveness and student performance. For example, in some studies of teacher working conditions, opportunities for professional growth and collegiality are correlated with the improvement of professional skill and efficacy and a school's success. Conversely, the absence of opportunities to broaden their instructional horizons is cited by teachers as a reason for absenteeism and attrition from work. The literature on teacher working conditions indicates that recognition and support from administrators have a significant impact on the quality of teaching. Unfortunately, according to *The American Teacher: Strengthening the Relationship Between Teachers and Students*, a 1988 nationwide survey of teachers conducted by Metropolitan Life, more than one out of three respondents said that teachers at their school were recognized by their principals for their performance or expertise only occasionally or never. Finally, another dimension identified in the literature is the opportunity to experience responsibility for the outcomes of one's work—to be involved in making decisions in the classroom and in the school, and to feel ownership and responsibility for the outcomes of those decisions. The enhancement of job performance and commitment is dependent on teachers' perception of work as meaningful in terms of their personal values and beliefs.

However, when local school boards face acute budget problems, as many in Virginia currently do, plans to improve working conditions are often delayed as divisions attempt to maintain teacher and textbook levels. At the same time, state initiatives to restructure K-12 education and to measure teacher accountability are under way. Although teachers are asked to meet increasingly demanding expectations of other educators, parents, and students, and frequently strive to do so with fewer resources and more students, little thought is given to the conditions under which teachers must practice their profession. In fact, the Virginia Education Association (VEA) found little statewide data about teacher working conditions. Therefore, to measure teacher perceptions of working conditions in Virginia schools, the VEA conducted two research studies in 1991.

Surviving the Worst, Expecting the Best: Teacher Perceptions of Work Life in Virginia Schools, a qualitative study cosponsored by the Virginia Education Association and the Appalachia Educational Laboratory, presents Virginia teachers' perceptions on 10 factors that influence their work environment: resources/instructional materials; physical facilities/class size; professional development; teacher-teacher interactions; teacher-administrator interactions; teacher-student interactions; school-parent/community interactions and involvement; school goals and objectives; school decisionmaking and change; and personnel policies. The working conditions described by teachers who participated in regional focus group interviews vary greatly from region to region, from division to division within each region, and from school to school within a division. A statewide summary reports the factors upon which there was substantial agreement across regions. For example, with few exceptions, Virginia teachers expressed dissatisfaction with their schools' physical facilities as they described conditions such as overcrowding, climate control problems, and poorly organized instructional space. Also, teachers shared perceptions of the importance of professional interactions, and they overwhelmingly agreed that the quality of interactions with their principal has the greatest impact on their working conditions. Although their responses to interview questions did not always indicate that the teachers felt supported

by educational systems and communities, their commitment to students was apparent.

The description of current conditions for teaching and learning throughout Virginia is a major goal of this publication. However, the authors, teachers from throughout Virginia and VEA and AEL staff members, also intend that *Surviving the Worst, Expecting the Best: Teacher Perceptions of Work Life in Virginia Schools* inform parents, teachers, administrators, school boards, and policymakers who may act to improve local schools. Therefore, the authors include recommendations for policy and practice to improve working conditions. Many of these recommendations address professional interactions, school funding, and school decisionmaking—factors of importance and concern to all Virginia educators. For example, the authors recommend that:

- Teachers enhance professionalism and gain support by promoting collegiality and interacting positively with administrators and the public.
- Principals recognize teachers as team colleagues, involve teachers meaningfully in school decisionmaking, and incorporate time for training/research and participation in decisionmaking.
- Division administrators make available sufficient funds to meet instructional needs throughout the year.
- State policy makers restructure school funding to alleviate disparities in educational facilities and resources among regions of the state.

Surviving the Worst, Expecting the Best: Teacher Perceptions of Work Life in Virginia Schools can assist local and state efforts to modify the circumstances that hinder teacher effectiveness and maximize teachers' potential to educate children.

Introduction

Purpose of the Publication

Surviving the Worst, Expecting the Best: Teacher Perceptions of Work Life in Virginia Schools resulted from an interest by teachers, and those who assist them, in teacher perceptions of their current working conditions. The authors, teachers from throughout Virginia and VEA and AEL staff members who assisted their Quality of Teacher Working Conditions Study Group, intend that their publication achieve the following purposes:

- describe in detail current conditions for teaching and learning in Virginia;
- provide "an ear" to teachers' voices speaking on vital professional issues;
- provide information for use by parents, teachers, administrators, and school boards to improve schools;
- illustrate the variability of teacher working conditions throughout the state; and
- lay the groundwork for discussions at the local and state levels about the adequacy of the environment in which teachers must practice their profession.

Methodology

VEA interest in a status report of teacher working conditions began with its 1991 quantitative study on teacher working conditions that employed an NEA-developed and validated survey of 78 items with a five-choice, Likert-type response scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree (see Appendix A). The survey was focused especially on teacher-principal interactions with instructions on the form explaining: "This survey of teachers' working conditions concerns the goals, objectives, priorities, and expectations influenced by school administrators that ultimately affect classroom teachers." The survey was mailed with a cover letter to 500 randomly selected VEA teacher members in February 1991. Three reminder mailings with survey copies were sent in the five months which followed until a response rate of approximately 60 percent was achieved. NEA analyzed the data and provided summaries to VEA research staff who developed and dissemenated the final report of the findings. Readers are encouraged to draw conclusions based upon a comparison of this report with the findings reported in *Surviving the Worst, Expecting the Best: Teacher Perceptions of Work Life in Virginia Schools*, a qualitative study.

VEA-AEL Quality of Teacher Working Conditions Study Group members utilized a qualitative research method, the focus group interview, in order to capture teacher perceptions in their own words within regions of the state. The moderator's guide they developed included 37 questions organized in 10 clusters. As the guide developed, a basis for comparison between the quantitative and qualitative studies was desired. Study group members, following their training in focus group interview techniques, began with a categorization of items on the Virginia "Survey of Teacher Satisfaction with Working Conditions" into emerging clusters. Clusters centered on 10 factors that influence teachers' working conditions: quality, quantity, and selection of resources/instructional materials; facilities/class size; professional development; teacher with teacher interactions; teacher with administrator interactions; teacher with student interactions; school-parent/community interaction and involvement; school goals and objectives; school decisionmaking and change; and personnel policies. Additionally, teachers were asked to respond to the question: "What has had the greatest impact on working conditions for

you?" Study group members then developed open-ended questions for each cluster and field tested the draft survey with groups of colleagues in their home schools or divisions. Final revisions and reordering of the question clusters occurred in an April 1991 study group meeting following these field tests. Study group members then served as interviewers, assisted by a VEA or AEL staff member as facilitator, in the seven regional focus group interviews. Study group members developed the regional sections of this publication after receiving training on focus group interview data analysis and reporting.

The focus group interview is defined by The Burke Institute, Cincinnati-based trainers in this methodology, as a "means of obtaining in-depth information on a specific topic through a discussion group atmosphere" (1990, p. 1.01). Bellinger and Greenberg point out an advantage of the technique in *Marketing Research: A Management Information Approach*. They explain that it is based upon the assumption that individuals who share a problem will be more willing to talk about it amid the security of others sharing the problem (1978, 1. 171). While teaching conditions should not be assumed to be problematic, the focus group interview permits more self-disclosure by individuals from disparate divisions than might be forthcoming from one-on-one interviews.

While focus groups are commonly used in marketing studies, the approach serves as viable data gathering—even when the topic is more complex than product satisfaction. In contrasting with one-on-one interviews, The Burke Institute's Focus Group Interview Moderator Training Manual notes five factors to consider: value of interaction, sensitivity of subject matter, cost and timing, depth of information per respondent, and logistics. The VEA-AEL study group's choice of this methodology hinged upon several advantages to the focus group interview noted by The Burke Institute; for example, "when interaction will spark new thought," "when subject matter is such that participants will not withhold information or temper remarks," and the "need to economize (is) present" (p. 1.10).

Limitations to the use of focus group interviewing in this study include: the limited number of interviews and of participants in each interview, the lack of in-depth experience in interviewing and in analyzing and reporting data on the part of study group members, the breadth of the interview topic "working conditions," and the limited time volunteer study group members were able to contribute to the project.

However, with training in moderator guide development, question delivery, appropriate interviewer response and probing, analyzing field notes and audio tapes, and summarizing and reporting data, study group members felt confident in capturing the statements of teachers throughout the state while learning a research method they may employ in the future.

Study group members determined that reporting of the data within clusters for each region would provide the reader with differences in working conditions across the state. The Findings section of this publication provides these regional summaries as well as a statewide analysis.

Rationale

John Goodlad (1983) concluded, after interviewing 1,350 teachers for his study *A Place Called School*:

> "If teachers are potentially powerfully influential in the education of children and youth in school but the circumstances so inhibit their functioning, then we need to modify these circumstances so as to maximize teachers' potential. The directions of school improvement become reasonably clear: diagnose and seek to remedy the impending conditions; improve teachers' knowledge and skills" (p. 168).

A review of the literature indicates that a number of conditions affect the working environment in schools and, as Goodlad concluded, certain of these conditions may inhibit teachers' efforts to enhance students' learning.

Findings from *Surviving the Worst, Expecting the Best: Teacher Perceptions of Work Life in Virginia Schools* and a parallel quantitative study conducted by VEA are congruent with findings from other recent studies (e.g., Little, 1982; Lieberman, 1986; Metropolitan Life Survey, 1988; Rosenholtz, 1989; Maeroff, 1991) that focus on problems within the teaching profession. Particularly notable are similar findings reported in the literature regarding professional development, teacher-teacher interactions, teacher-administrator interactions, and school decisionmaking. Therefore, this Rationale presents research that illustrates how these factors affect teachers' perceptions of their working conditions.

Professional Development

From survey data and follow-up interviews with teachers from 78 elementary schools, Susan Rosenholtz (1989) concluded that the enhancement of job performance and commitment was dependent on people's perception of work as meaningful in terms of their personal values and beliefs. For teachers, this includes opportunities for professional growth, teacher efficacy, and teachers' effects on students. Teachers frequently cited the absence of opportunities to broaden their instructional horizons as a reason for absenteeism and attrition from work (p. 425). Moreover, opportunities for professional growth enhanced teachers' perceptions that they possess the ability and skills to accommodate increased work challenges. "When teachers feel efficacious about their professional practices, they expend greater effort with students" (p. 425).

Judith Warren Little (1982) similarly concluded from interviews with teachers and administrators in six schools that the school as a workplace is extremely powerful in that each school creates certain possibilities and sets certain limits in regard to professional development and collegiality.

> "In successful schools more than in unsuccessful ones, teachers valued and participated in norms of collegiality and continuous improvement (experimentation); they pursued a greater range of professional interactions with fellow teachers or administrators, including talk about instruction, structured observation, and shared planning or preparation" (p. 325).

From Little's data, staff development appears to have the greatest prospects for influence where there is the most collegiality and experimentation.

These perspectives are further reinforced from information gleaned by Maeroff (1991) in interviews with 115 "exceptional teachers" identified through competition sponsored by the National Foundation for the Improvement of Education. In regard to professional development, Maeroff reported that "exceptional teachers":

- respond positively to the idea of giving the best teachers some responsibility for the continuing education of their colleagues;
- would like to see better ongoing professional development for experienced teachers; and
- want more time to meet with their colleagues, to plan with them, to observe other teachers at work, and to attend conferences outside the school building during the school day (p. 8).

Teacher-Teacher Interactions

Data from the studies cited in this Rationale indicate some overlapping in findings regarding professional development and teacher-teacher interactions. For example, one of the principal ways in which teachers in Little's study (1982) characterized the buildings in which they worked was by whether there was a norm of collegiality: Is the faculty "close"; do teachers frequently talk and work together; and are teachers' interactions frequently focused on the business of teaching? This norm of collegiality was directly related to the improvement of professional skill and efficacy and the school's success (pp. 328-330).

In regard to interactions with their peers, Maeroff reported that a majority of "exceptional teachers" said they would prefer being part of a team. They also agreed that administrators must be sympathetic to the needs of teachers to interact with colleagues (Maeroff, 1991, p. 8). One teacher offered a poignant statement that summarizes teachers' feelings about isolation from their peers: "Schoolteaching is a lonely and demanding task that is diminished by lack of contact with other adults and by insufficient information about how others do their jobs" (Maeroff, 1991, p. 8).

Other research studies (Lieberman & Miller, 1984; Maeroff, 1988; Flinders, 1989) support the need for interaction among teachers and between teachers and administrators. Maeroff (1988) cited isolation as a real problem for teachers that leads to alienation and attrition. Because teachers draw strength from each other, bringing them into closer contact with each other is the key to empowerment (pp. 26-27). Similarly, Flinders (1989) identified isolation from fellow teachers and administrators as a recurring theme of professional life in schools. From observations and interviews with teachers, Flinders also concluded that such isolation is often by choice for two reasons: interpersonal demands of interacting with students and conservation of teachers' resources, particularly time. Nevertheless, when teachers are isolated from their peers and administrators, it leaves them with few sources of feedback and guidance (pp. 64-65).

Teacher-Administrator Interactions

The literature on teachers' working conditions also indicates that recognition and support from administrators have a significant impact on the quality of teaching (Lieberman, 1986; Brodinsky & Neill, 1983; Schlansker, 1987; Rosenholtz, 1989). For work to be motivating, people must have knowledge of the success of their efforts. "Most teachers derive their strongest rewards from positive and academic successful relations with students and from external recognition they receive from colleagues, principals, and parents" (Rosenholtz, 1989, p. 423).

Unfortunately, according to teachers who responded to the *Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher 1988*, administrative support in many schools leaves much to be desired. Seventy-nine percent of all teachers responding agreed they felt frustrated with administrative practices. Thirty-seven percent strongly agreed with that perception; only 10 percent strongly disagreed (p. 36). Part of the reason for this high level of frustration may be that teachers said they were too infrequently recognized for their expertise and performance. More than one out of three said that teachers at their schools were recognized only occasionally or never for their performance or expertise (p. 33).

Schlansker (1987) also identified the principal as a significant source of support for teachers in dealing with school issues. Teacher respondents to the *Schlansker Supports Value Inventory* who identified the principal as an important source of support were among those reporting the **lowest** level of teacher stress and burnout. Also, of the 10 most stressful

events for teachers in this study, half are considered management tensions: notification of unsatisfactory performance, involuntary transfer, denial of promotion or advancement, overcrowded classrooms, and disagreements with supervisors.

> "While the principal is usually the most important source of support for teachers under stress, there are times when the principal is also a major source of stress. A principal who fails to provide support while actively pursuing excellence can contribute significantly to the stress experienced by some teachers. Principals need to be sensitive to the individual needs of their teachers" (Schlansker, p. 34).

Finally, in all schools Little (1982) studied that were characterized by staff as highly collegial (therefore, according to Little, highly successful), teachers viewed the principal as an active endorser and participant in collegial work (p. 330).

School Decisionmaking

Another dimension of the social organization of schools associated with teacher quality and commitment identified in the literature is the opportunity to experience responsibility for the outcomes of one's work (Brodinsky & Neill, 1983; Sergiovanni, 1985; Rosenholtz, 1989; Maeroff, 1991). "Lack of discretion over classroom learning affairs is frequently implicated in the failure of schools to succeed academically with students" (Rosenholtz, 1989, p. 424). Brodinsky and Neill cited three policies identified in their survey of school administrators that effectively improve morale and motivate staff, including shared governance. Likewise, Sergiovanni (1985) found that teachers obtain their greatest satisfaction through a sense of achievement in reaching and affecting students, experiencing recognition, and feeling responsible.

Lieberman (1986) also found that freedom to be creative and innovative was one of four factors that enabled some teachers to maintain positive attitudes about their jobs. The influence of this factor was reiterated by "exceptional teachers" interviewed by Maeroff. "Exceptional teachers, confident in their abilities, want to be free to improvise in order to change the length of periods, alter the required curriculum, and vary their instructional methods" (Maeroff, 1991, p. 10). Moreover, at least 60 percent of these "exceptional teachers" indicated they want more input in such matters as allocating school funds, designing curriculum, selecting principals, choosing instructional materials, determining salaries, promoting students, and designing schedules. Ninety-six percent of the "exceptional teachers" urged that the role of teachers in setting policies be expanded (Maeroff, 1991, p. 10).

Maeroff summarized the importance of including teachers in school decisionmaking as a factor in maximizing their job performance:

> "People work more effectively when they feel a sense of ownership, when they feel that they are not simply toiling in circumstances that have been thrust upon them. Schools cut themselves off from a great deal of wisdom when teachers, especially the ablest ones, are limited to doing the bidding of others and their ideas are not taken into consideration" (Maeroff, 1991, p. 11).

In summary, teaching and learning do not take place within a vacuum, they occur within a context. In the case of teaching, an array of factors contribute to this context. Ultimately, the positive and negative aspects of the teaching environment enhance or hinder teaching effectiveness and student performance. As Goodlad (1983) suggested, we need to diagnose and modify these circumstances so as to maximize teachers' potential to educate children (p. 168). The findings from the VEA-AEL study reported on the following pages are a significant step in diagnosing teachers' working conditions in Virginia. The authors intend that this evidence provide a direction for teachers, administrators, and policymakers who seek to remedy workplace conditions that hinder teaching effectiveness. "The empowerment of teachers remains linked to the empowerment of students" (Maeroff, 1988, p.57).

Findings of the Study

Teacher Working Conditions in Virginia: Statewide Summary

During the spring of 1991, seven groups of teachers (a total of 45 participants) representing divisions within each Superintendent's Region of Virginia participated in focus group interviews conducted by VEA-AEL Quality of Teacher Working Conditions Study Group members using the Moderator's Guide (see Appendix B). From small rural schools and large urban divisions, representatives of all grade levels and disciplines discussed their perceptions of working conditions at their schools. The working conditions described by these teachers varied greatly from region to region, from division to division within each region, and from school to school within a division. Using terms ranging from **supportive, positive, pleasant,** and **cooperative** to **stressful, demoralized, lonely,** and **inoperable,** teachers described their perceptions of the quality of working conditions in their schools.

To gain more detailed information on what influences teachers' perceptions of their working conditions, study group members posed 37 questions relating to 10 factors in the work environment. This statewide summary reports the factors upon which there was substantial agreement across regions, either in positive or negative perceptions or in the importance of a particular factor to the quality of work conditions.

There was little diversity in responses to the interview's opening question: "What has had the greatest impact on your working conditions?" A large majority of teacher respondents cited the building administrator as the key factor in influencing the quality of their work environment. Following is a summary of perceptions of each of 10 additional conditions in the work environment.

Resources/Instructional Materials

The availability or allocation of funds differs greatly among the seven regions, according to responses. For example, positive perceptions about instructional resources were shared by teachers in regions where money was available throughout the school year to purchase materials, teachers were involved in the selection of materials, and adequate materials were provided to meet the needs of all students. Negative perceptions were voiced in regions where teachers had to purchase instructional materials "out of pocket," materials were out of date, inappropriate for student needs, or in short supply (such as sharing class sets of textbooks).

Physical Facilities/Class Size

With few exceptions, Virginia teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the physical facilities in which they work. Overcrowding, climate control problems, lack of appropriate instructional equipment, and inappropriate or poorly organized instructional environments were described by a majority of teacher respondents statewide.

Teachers agreed that the condition of the physical environment directly affects student performance. Many respondents described negative effects on teaching and learning such as tension and irritability in students and teachers, teachers' inability to utilize appropriate instructional activities, students' inability to concentrate, and health problems resulting from inadequate, poorly maintained, or poorly organized facilities.

Most teacher respondents either indicated their class size was too large or expressed the fear that budget cuts, population shifts, or school consolidation would increase their class size to an unmanage-

able number. Teachers agreed that the methods for determining student-teacher ratios are often misleading because certain special-needs and state-mandated classes with lower student-teacher ratios are included when average class size is computed.

Many teachers stated that stressful classroom climates, discipline problems, inability to assist individual students, and modified or limited learning opportunities for students—conditions they perceived in larger classes—hindered their teaching effectiveness.

Professional Development

Teachers' perceptions varied regarding professional development opportunities. While most teachers agreed that a variety of inservice activities, both site-based and systemwide, were offered, perceptions of the quality of offerings varied from region to region throughout the state. Many teachers expressed the opinion that they did not have adequate input into designing and planning professional development activities. Therefore, many found these activities, particularly those that were mandatory, irrelevant to their needs. Conversely, teachers who were involved in planning and implementing professional development programs, or who were allowed to design a personal professional development plan, expressed greater satisfaction with the quality of professional development activities. There were also varied responses on the degree to which teachers received support for participation in professional development activities, including securing professional leave, receiving reimbursement for expenses, being informed of opportunities and encouraged to attend by the principal, and having opportunities to share new information with colleagues.

Interactions

With regard to their interactions with colleagues, students, and administrators, teachers in all regions shared some common perceptions. The opportunity to interact with fellow teachers was a valued aspect of working life in schools. Teachers described interactions with their colleagues that helped solve problems with students, resulted in positive changes in their teaching, or contributed to their emotional well-being. Communication with other teachers was enhanced in working situations where departmental or team organization afforded teachers time during the school day to plan and work together. However, in many schools, teachers reported interaction time with their colleagues was too brief. Most teachers described sporadic conversations that took place before or after school or at lunchtime. Although many teachers felt isolated from their colleagues by school organizations that limited their opportunities for interaction, they agreed that when teacher-teacher interactions occurred they were supportive and constructive.

Interactions with students were generally described as positive. With few exceptions, teachers reported positive relationships with students and positive perceptions of students' attitudes toward school.

Virginia teachers overwhelmingly agreed that the quality of interactions with their principals most significantly affected the quality of their working conditions. They described a wide variety of principal qualities. When asked, "What word best characterizes your principal," responses throughout the state ranged from **dictatorial, insensitive, untrustworthy,** and **confused** to **wonderful, supportive, caring,** and **child-centered.** Teachers praised principals who were caring, supportive, and people-oriented while they expressed frustration with principals whom they felt were egotistical, unavailable, and domineering. Most teachers agreed that working with a good principal improved their attitude about other factors in their work environment.

School-Parent/Community Interaction and Involvement

There was considerable diversity in teachers' perceptions on this factor. While a number of teachers throughout the state described little parent/community involvement in their schools and offered their perceptions of reasons such as transportation problems and parent apathy, many teachers described active parent/community participation in their schools through activities such as volunteers in the

classroom, parent conferences, awards dinners, and family counseling. Successful methods employed by teachers to increase parent/community involvement included making home visits, providing transportation for parents to school activities, and providing babysitting services for evening programs.

School Goals and Objectives

Teachers who responded to questions relating to goals and objectives described systemwide, school, and personal goals. However, in most cases, they expressed little feeling of ownership of any of these goals because, in their view, the goals were imposed "top down" by principals or central office. In regions where teachers responded positively, they indicated having had involvement in schoolwide goal setting and felt motivated and responsible for goal attainment.

School Decisionmaking and Change

Responses to questions on this factor of teacher working conditions indicated there was little teacher participation in school decisionmaking in Virginia. The most positive perceptions came from teachers who indicated they had influenced decisions at their schools through participation on the principal's or superintendent's advisory councils, building leadership teams, or other groups empowered to give input or to share in decisionmaking. The greatest frustrations were expressed by teachers who felt decisions were "mandated from on high" or that their input was solicited but not regarded.

Personnel Policies

Teachers expressed concerns with policies related to reduction in staff, voluntary transfer, personal and sick leave, and teacher evaluation. Typical perceptions reported were of unfairness or of inconsistency in policy interpretation and enforcement.

Conclusions

Teachers' perceptions of the quality of their working conditions varied considerably throughout the seven regions of Virginia from pleasant and challenging to frustrating and demoralizing. However, their professional attitude and commitment, revealed through comments about the joys and challenges of teaching, were consistent. At the close of each focus group interview, teachers were asked to summarize their perceptions of teacher working conditions by completing this statement: "When I get up to go to work in the morning, my attitude is __ because ___." Teachers did not always provide responses to questions in the interview that indicated they felt supported by educational systems and communities, but their responses to this final question revealed their personal commitment to students. Consistently, teachers used words such as **excited, enthusiastic,** and **optimistic** to describe their attitude. They frequently completed the statement with phrases such as **because of the kids, because I love teaching,** and **what we're doing is important.**

Regional Summaries

Approximately 45 teachers, representatives from each Superintendent's Region, participated in focus group interviews. Each interview, conducted by a VEA-AEL Quality of Teacher Working Conditions Study Group member, was a discussion about such issues as class size, availability of instructional resources, professional development opportunities, and other concerns that affect teaching and learning. Following are summaries of the data collected in each region on what influences teachers' perceptions of working conditions at their schools (See Regional Map, Appendix C). These summaries are intended to provide information that can be used by parents, teachers, administrators, and school boards to improve working conditions; to determine variations in teacher working conditions across the state and identify areas where disparities exist; and to lay the groundwork for discussions at the local and state level about the adequacy of the environment in which Virginia teachers must practice their profession.

Each summary is preceded by a brief description of the region that provides a sense of the geography; relative wealth as indicated on the local composite index (calculated on true value of property in the locality, adjusted gross income, taxable retail sales, average daily membership, and the total population); student population; and types of teachers participating in the interview. The range of local composite indices is .20 to .80 (lowest to highest indicates poorest to wealthiest). The quotations from interview participants were selected because they best typify all responses to questions within each cluster of the Moderator's Guide. To preserve anonymity of each interview participant, all references to school or division names have been omitted.

Northern Virginia Region A

This region inside the Washington Beltway is characterized by urban-suburban divisions. Student population ranges from 10,300 to 122,500. The local composite index is high, ranging from .69 to .80.

Seven teachers representing preschool through high school and special services participated in this interview. To begin the interview, they were asked: "What two or three words best describe working conditions at your school?" A majority of the teachers used contrasting descriptors.

"Stressful, but many rewards."

"Hectic, but relations are congenial."

"Comfortable, secure, demanding, exhausting."

The majority of teachers in this focus group stated that the greatest impact on their working conditions was the increase in the emotional and social needs of their students.

"It is difficult to teach the curriculum when students have so many other issues that need to be addressed, such as empty stomachs, bruises, and little or no attention at home."

Resources/Instructional Materials

- The majority of teachers in this interview were satisfied with the quantity and quality of instructional materials available to them.

  "At the end of last year, I was able to order hundreds of trade books."

  "We are outstanding in this area—we have hundreds of computers in the school."

- Two special education teachers, however, expressed dissatisfaction.

"We are the spare tire; we get what's left over."

"Gifted and talented is not funded except out of my pocket."

- Most teachers also were very satisfied with their involvement in the selection of materials.

"I'm real happy about what we have. The teachers have a great voice in selection (of materials)."

Facilities/Class size

- Two teachers expressed satisfaction with their facilities, while a majority were dissatisfied with the physical environment of their schools.

"Ours is a beautiful school because the parents and students raised money for it."

"The physical environment in my situation is a tremendous hindrance. I don't have my own classroom. I share my classroom with an afternoon teacher. I'm feeding two-year-olds lunch, getting them ready to go home, and trying to get the room cleaned up for the class coming in. I have no time when I can be in the classroom working, setting up, and planning when there are not students in the room."

"There are never enough phones and never enough privacy or quiet to use them."

"Our heating and air conditioning systems are controlled at the central office."

- Most teachers stated that their class sizes were too large.

"I will always complain about class size until I'm down to 16 students. In the last three years, my class size has varied from 34 to 22 students. I think class size is the most important factor in education."

"My classroom is like a box, and I have 24 students."

Professional Development

- In this region, most participants in the interview reported that they had numerous opportunities to participate in professional development activities, but they expressed dissatisfaction with both the type of opportunities offered and the fact that many of them are mandatory.

"I find that I have plenty of opportunity to attend workshops and inservices that are presented by the county, but . . . so many of them are a waste of time, and it's usually the mandatory ones that are the worst."

"Our system goes in for fads. Peer coaching is now in."

"Most workshops are demeaning, demoralizing, and insulting to teachers."

- Many of the teachers stated that the most worthwhile professional development activities were those that were planned/presented by teachers, either at the school or within the district.

"I've been in the county a long time and I've seen a tremendous growth in this area, especially now that staff members are involved in planning and presenting workshops instead of hiring everyone from the outside."

"Our staff planned a staff retreat. Everyone participated, including the custodian and cook. Afterwards, we started treating each other differently—caring about each other."

- Many teachers reported that their administrators/peers encourage them to share what they've learned both on their own and in professional development activities.

". . . we're encouraged to come back and share with our colleagues. Last year we had a voluntary support group that met to talk about the integrated language arts curriculum. We met once a week and normally had 15-20 teachers involved."

"I'm not allowed to present any of the training I've had because I'm not a supervisor."

Teacher-Teacher Interactions

- Almost all of the teachers reported that they consider interactions with their colleagues extremely important. They interact with each other whenever they can—before school, after school, at lunch, during early closing days, during planning periods, in the teachers' lounge. However, the challenge lies in finding quality time to talk.

  "We never have enough time to talk. Our days are too fragmented. You can't plan to meet with someone at a certain time. You just have to grab them when you can."

  "Teacher interactions are real important—before school, after school, during lunch."

- Most teachers stated that they get support from other teachers and give support as well. Many said that their teaching has changed because of interactions with other teachers.

  "A lot of people come to me to ask about books or the writing process. I am weak in science, but one of our teachers who received the Virginia State Award for science teachers has been wonderful in helping me. Another teacher is really good in social studies and math. He'll find something fun to do and share that with me. So, it's reciprocal."

  "My teaching has changed as a result (of teacher-teacher interactions), and I think I really get strength from strong teachers. I try to figure out who those people are, and then I hang out with them."

Teacher-Administrator Interactions

- A majority of teachers described their principals in positive terms, such as **supportive, professional, committed, child-centered,** and **dedicated.**

  "My principal is totally supportive. She believes in her staff."

  "The first word that I thought of (to describe the principal) was **child-centered**, but now I think I have to change that to **involved**. He does such things as taking morning and afternoon bus duty so that teachers are free to be in their classrooms preparing for the children."

  One teacher described her principal negatively.

  "He shows no respect or authority. He is uninvolved."

- Most of the teachers indicated that they were very satisfied with their relationships with their principals.

  "I am very satisfied. He is very visible. He knows the names of all 650 students and their parents names. Also, we have professional trust. If I believe that something's worth trying, he believes that I should try it."

  "My principal is totally supportive, professional, and respectful."

  "He is committed and dedicated, and he handles problems in confidence."

  One teacher expressed dissatisfaction with her relationship with her principal.

  "I am not satisfied with my interactions with my principal. He doesn't meet teachers' needs."

Teacher-Student Interactions

- Teachers' perceptions about students' attitudes toward the school were generally positive. They reported that students feel as though the teachers care about them. Although students may not admit it openly, they want to come to school.

  "Our biggest problem is making the kids go home before six o'clock."

  "Kids say they are bored. But when they write in journals in my class, they describe feelings of appreciation for their teachers."

- Many teachers in the group described varying levels of expectations for students at their school.

"Some teachers expect less than students can give because they are tired."

"There is a wide range of socio-economic status represented in our school population. Teachers' expectations vary according to the student's socio-economic status."

"We are overachievers. We don't teach down; we teach up."

Parent-Community-School Interactions

- A majority of the teachers perceived a lack of parent and community involvement in their school.

  "There isn't very much parent involvement in the school. In fact, the PTO is limited in the number of people who participate. We have only one or two parents who come in to help with clerical chores. We don't have any parents who come into the classroom to help with instruction."

  "In our district, there's lots of involvement from wealthy parents, but little from the poor."

- On the other hand, a few teachers described active parent-community involvement in their school. In each case, the school made special efforts to involve parents.

  "In our preschool program, I visit each family twice a month. To get parents to come to our meetings, we provide babysitting."

  "There are 25 activities, such as a book fair and science fair, done by parents in my school. The principal is always involving parents in school activities."

School Decisionmaking and Change

- Most of the teachers reported being involved in school decisionmaking. They described positive changes that have occurred as a result of school teams or committees that have addressed teachers' concerns.

  "At the end of last year, we decided to group differently. That came about as the result of a staff survey conducted by the Leadership Team, which consisted of a teacher from each grade level and two specialists. We devised the survey, sent it out to the faculty, and made changes in grouping based on survey results."

  "At our faculty retreat, we wrote down the committee we wanted to work on. There were activities for each committee, and everyone participated. We ironed out objectives. There is consensus on all decisions made."

- Some teachers expressed frustration with their lack of involvement in decisionmaking, but others reported satisfaction with their participation.

  "Central office makes suggestions, but we know it will have to be done. It just comes from above and you can't do anything about it."

  "Teachers are given the opportunity to be heard (by the principal), but [they are] not listened to."

  "The principal has opened up the process of faculty involvement and has changed the tone of the school."

  "I talk to a person on the Leadership Team if I have an issue that needs to be discussed. Major issues are voted on by the faculty."

Personnel Policies

- The majority of teachers interviewed reported dissatisfaction with the personnel policies in their districts.

  "People are not hired necessarily for their skills, but to fill a space."

  "The one gripe I have is with the new evaluation system. They say it's there to weed out mediocre teachers, but it just doesn't work. People are getting merit pay who don't deserve it. So much depends on the school principal."

"Personnel policies are political."

At the close of the interview, teachers were asked to complete this statement: "When I get up in the morning I feel ____ because _____." Many of the participants in this region reported that they feel frustrated with the amount of paperwork required of them, but realize that working with students is what keeps them returning every fall.

"I feel positive to a degree because the kids need me. But paperwork and added responsibilities are overwhelming."

"I feel anxious because I don't know what's coming down from the principal or central office."

"The garbage that keeps me from my students gets me down."

Northern Virginia Region B

This region outside the Washington Beltway is a suburban-rural area with some areas of wealth. School divisions range in population from 2,300 to 37,000, and the composite index ranges from .38 to .64.

Five teachers—three regular classroom teachers from middle school and high school, and two special needs teachers representing elementary and middle school—participated. When asked: "What two or three words best describe working conditions in your school?" teachers expressed a broad range of feelings regarding their working conditions. Responses varied from **barely satisfactory** and **tense** to **supportive, positive**, and **teachers are working together**.

With regard to what has the greatest impact on teachers' working conditions, the teachers in this interview unanimously cited the administration. Although some teachers described situations where the administration was supportive and worked well with the faculty, all respondents described problem situations.

"Teachers are not just educators. They deal with administrative frustrations; an overload of paperwork; and the multiple roles of teacher, parent, nurse, and counselor for their students."

"Some administrators have forgotten where they came from. Their attitudes affect teachers' attitudes."

Resources/Instructional Materials

- Most teachers in this region expressed frustration with the quantity and quality of instructional materials. Several explained they have to spend their own money to procure up-to-date materials. However, in schools where site-based decision-making was in effect, fewer problems were reported.

  "I spent $100 out of my own pocket for trade books. Then the next year I got no money to support the alternative curriculum for third grade after I had bought the books!"

  "We don't use the five-year-old geography books because they are out-of-date."

  "There are no globes or maps, and no good copier. Teachers can use only the blue dittoes, and you can't copy maps or graphs because they are not readable."

  "Our School Advisory Council knows how much money is allocated to each department. We get what we want."

- Although funding for purchasing instructional materials was often mentioned as a problem, most teachers is this region indicated satisfaction with their involvement in the selection of textbooks and other materials.

  "Teachers have a lot of input into selection of materials."

- Another comment reflected a contrasting perception of teacher involvement in the selection of instructional materials.

  "The central office goes for the cheapest material and equipment. Textbook adoption is a

joke. If teachers don't agree with the superintendent, forget it."

Environment/Facilities and Class Size

- Teachers offered numerous examples of frustrating conditions in response to questions regarding school environment and facilities. All gave examples of overcrowding that had resulted in "every square inch" of building space being utilized. Some expressed concern about building safety because of overcrowding and poor heating, cooling and ventilation systems. All participants reported that such conditions in the school facilities and environment adversely affect instruction.

  "We are building classrooms in the wide hallways. There is no air in them."

  "The heating and air conditioning system is terrible. People are sick with respiratory problems because of poor ventilation. OSHA has been called, but they have never come."

  "My science classroom is congested. It is designed to seat 24, but I have 28-30 students. When we do a laboratory experiment, everything is piled on my desk because there's nowhere else to put things."

  "We are very overcrowded. Another special education teacher and I share the former principal's office. Next year we'll have a new building with more space, which will cut down on students' irritability."

- Participant responses indicated that class size varied widely in this region. All teachers agreed that the formula used by the central administration for determining class size was inequitable.

  "As a department, we regulate class size so Advanced Placement and remedial classes are smaller."

  "Because my science class has 30 students, I've had to cut back on the types of labs that I can teach effectively."

  "Specialists and state-mandated classes that have a lower teacher-pupil ratio are added into the total teacher-pupil ratio. This causes overcrowded classrooms to go unnoticed."

Professional Development

- Participants in this interview offered varying perceptions of professional development opportunities.

  "In our division, the workshops have been good. Some are voluntary; others are required. The central administration seeks teacher input on topics, grants professional leave generously, and counts what we do for recertification."

  "We had some inservice at school and enjoyed it."

  "I can't remember anything worthwhile in 11 years. It is rare to have an opportunity for personal professional development."

  "Teachers wanted more interaction with other teachers, but the idea was 'nixed' by the superintendent."

- Several teachers expressed frustration with getting information about the availability of professional development opportunities.

  "You have to be assertive, aggressive, or obnoxious to get access to information on what's available. That takes a lot of effort."

  "Often I find out about something too close to the deadline to take advantage of it."

- Although most teachers reported that professional leave was generally granted for personal professional development opportunities, many described difficulty in taking advantage of these opportunities because financial support was not provided by the division.

  "One year the division helped with registration fees for conferences/workshops and some-

times paid for travel. They also paid for two graduate courses within a five-year period. Now they are not paying for anything."

"I have colleagues who have taught 11-12 years and who have not attended anything. Professional leave is available, but it costs teachers so much to attend."

"There is no encouragement to attend professional development opportunities because substitute pay is so high."

- None of the teachers described organized opportunities to share information from professional development sessions with their colleagues.

"Sharing between teachers is individual."

Teacher-Teacher Interactions

- Most teachers described a variety of informal and formal opportunities for teacher-teacher interactions. Where teams or departments had common planning time during the school day, interactions were generally described as instructionally focused and supportive for teachers. Also, in schools where structures such as Building Leadership Teams and Advisory Councils were in place, teachers reported better communication among faculty members. Where informal interactions took place randomly "in the hallway, the bathroom, the faculty lounge, etc." before or after school, or at lunch, teachers frequently described more negative discussions that included school concerns and items of personal concern.

"Sometimes we do a lot of complaining, but the positive side is that problems are aired."

"There is no set time to discuss problems that are bothering us. You see someone in the hall and complain."

"An open forum is held at the beginning of the Advisory Council meetings twice each month so anyone can come in and talk about concerns."

"Our Building Leadership Team is helping to solve school problems. They bring issues up for faculty vote. Our homework policy was developed this way."

- Several teachers stated that their interactions with other teachers provide support and professional growth.

"Lots of sharing of ideas and teaming with other teachers has changed the way I feel about teaching. Teams are special—good for teachers and students."

"There's lots of sharing in my department. For example, my AP (advanced placement) material is used by other teachers."

Teacher-Administrator Interactions

- Teachers in this focus group described their principals in a variety of terms, including **insecure**, a **bully**, **available**, and **great**. All participants agreed that principals need more effective training in recognizing and responding to teachers' accomplishments and needs.

"While he may handle instructional and policy issues well, the personal side is lacking."

"He lacks social skills—doesn't recognize teachers' personal situations."

"He gives no feedback or thanks to teachers."

- Although most of the teachers described some problems in their interactions with their principals, they also expressed satisfaction with their overall relationship with their principal.

"I am extremely satisfied with my principal. We negotiate over my concerns. He does respond when you tell him what is needed."

"My principal is open and good about meeting people who confront him."

"I always go to meet him with a positive approach, and I've never been refused."

Teacher-Student Interactions

- All of the teachers in the group reported positive interactions between students and teachers and positive student feelings about school.

  "Kids feel good about coming to school. They like their classes and are happy and content."

  "Students like to see each other at school because it's so rural. It's their life together."

  "Students volunteer to stay after school to work on areas for which they need help."

- Participants described a range of perceptions about teachers' expectations for students.

  "High expectations are held for students by the whole faculty."

  "Some have high standards; others don't. For example, in regard to attendance, some say 'it doesn't matter if they come to school,' or 'I don't keep track of tardies.'"

  "Expectations are becoming more demanding. Students know what is expected of them."

Parent-Community-School Interactions

- A majority of the teachers felt that their faculties were doing a good job of communicating with and involving parents and community. They described a variety of ways in which teachers and administrators interact with parents, such as newsletters, phone calls, individual notes, and parent-teacher conferences.

  "I involve the students' families in our study of immigration by having the students interview their grandparents."

  "Parent-teacher conferences are scheduled during the day and in the evening to involve parents who work."

  "The community helps with the instructional program through volunteering at school and serving on the Advisory Committee."

School Goals and Objectives

- Although all teachers were aware of division and school goals, their feelings of ownership of these goals were minimal. The goals teachers set themselves were perceived as the most realistic. However, all teachers felt responsible for their school's successes and failures.

  "We have a biennial plan for the school, but some of the goals are so vague or unrealistic, such as 90 percent of our students will . . ."

  "The Building Leadership Team wrote a mission statement, and the faculty voted on it. We have a part in it."

  "Each teacher serves on a committee of the Advisory Council. The more they are involved, the better it goes."

School Decisionmaking and Change

- Most teachers reported having some involvement in instructional and/or policy decisionmaking processes at their school. They expressed satisfaction with being able to voice opinions regarding decisions and change.

  "Our faculty has been involved in developing criteria for hiring a new administrator and with interviewing applicants for the principal's position. We are also involved with scheduling."

  "Those of us who always thought we had enough sense to have something to do with what went on in the schools now have a chance to do it. We know where the money comes from and where we want it to go. School-based decisionmaking has been a very positive thing for us."

  "We need more time to make decisions at the school level."

- Teachers who did not participate in school decisionmaking or felt their input into school decisions made a difference expressed frustration.

"I wish we could make the decisions, but we don't get the final word. It's too frustrating."

Personnel Policies

- All participants expressed frustration with some personnel policies. Several of the teachers indicated that policies related to destaffing or reduction in faculty were inhibiting, demoralizing, or inconsistent.

  "We have a problem right now with the issue of voluntary transfers. Teachers are emotionally distraught about not knowing whether they will be at the new school next year or not."

  "Seniority means nothing to our administration."

- Teachers also indicated concern about policies regarding personal and sick leave.

  "Due to the amount of paperwork involved in requesting personal leave, I was encouraged to just take sick leave."

  "I resent all the pressure and harassing that I am supposed to be a professional when I don't get to choose the building of my choice, I don't get to choose the clients I work with, and I can't even decide when it is time that I'm in such bad condition that I need to be out. They want you to be more professional, but they don't treat you professionally."

Despite the frustrations aired during the interview, most of the teachers expressed positive feelings when asked how they feel about getting up to go to work in the mornings.

"For two years I cried every morning because of school. Now I'm in a different school and I anticipate going to work. It's a pleasure, and I'm not sick at night."

"I'm so happy where I am. The principal is the one who makes a difference."

Tidewater Region

School divisions in the southeastern corner of Virginia range from inner-city urban to burgeoning suburban to small rural divisions. Student populations in these divisions vary from 5,000 to 60,000. The local composite index ranges from .31 to .61, the lower to middle portion of the index range.

Six teachers representing elementary, middle, and senior high school regular and special education participated in the Tidewater Region focus group.

The following statements are indicative of teachers' responses to the question, "What has the greatest impact on your working conditions?"

"Class size. The more kids, the harder the job."

"The new principal in our school. He reprimands teachers in his office and gives no compliments. He has created a lot of stress for teachers."

"As teachers we are responsible for doing everything."

Resources/Instructional Materials

- A majority of the teachers described limited, antiquated, or unavailable instructional resources.

  "As a science teacher it is difficult to get equipment because it is very expensive. However, we don't have enough science equipment, and one-third of what we have needs parts."

  "I'm using a piano that was purchased in 1964. I had no record player or cassette player for my music classroom, so I bought a cassette player and tapes to use with my students."

  "I have one computer for 32 kids."

- Teachers indicated they often provide instructional materials out of pocket or make their own materials.

"I am buying needed resources with my own money. I even caught my own frogs (for science lab)."

"If I want to use the computer, I have to buy my own computer paper."

- Most of the teachers seemed reconciled to limited or unavailable resources. However, they were able to describe a positive aspect of the dilemma.

"These limitations (on instructional resources) make us go back into our heads and use what we have learned. It forces us to use our creativity."

Facilities/Class Size

- Although the physical environments described by teachers from this region varied from modern facilities to mobile trailers, climate control seemed to be a concern for all participants.

"We are entrusted with the care of a classroom full of students, be we are not allowed to touch the thermostat."

"There is no air conditioning in the school except in the office. We have summer school here, too."

- Specialist teachers reported the most inadequate facilities.

"My 'music house' is fine, except when it rains or snows. There is a leaky roof dating from construction of the building in 1976."

"I had 16 special education students all day last year in one-half of a mobile trailer."

- Overcrowded buildings and large classes were reported by most teachers. However, in primary classrooms and in schools identified as having a large number of low achieving students, class size was generally reported to be smaller.

"Some of our teachers float with carts because there aren't enough rooms."

"I have 30 students in my homeroom, and there just is not enough space for them to get away from each other in such close quarters."

"Since my school is a Title I school, kindergarten classes have 18-20 students with an aide. The fourth grade has 17 students, but the fifth has 28."

- Teachers agreed that larger class size had a negative effect on teaching and learning.

"Larger classes add stress to teachers and students because they often create discipline problems."

"I have to limit class projects and hands-on activities because there are just too many kids."

Professional Development

- Teachers from the Tidewater Region described a variety of professional development opportunities provided by the divisions and at the school. Larger systems offered a greater variety of opportunities, while smaller systems seemed to provide more general sessions, such as stress management, with limited emphasis on subject area needs.

"There is nothing offered in the arts. What I get I get at my own expense."

"Our inservice is more like faculty meetings—a one-way discussion."

"Our division has had good staff development with Madeline Hunter. However, offerings on inservice days are not real good."

- Most of the teachers reported that they received some monetary support for personal professional development opportunities.

"I get $35.00 a year for conferences."

"The division pays $75.00 per course for tuition."

"In science they pay you to teach a course to other teachers, to students, and to learn at the same time."

- Teachers stated that they are encouraged to grow professionally through the implementation of career ladders and the point system for state recertification. However, participation in outside conferences and programs occurring during a school day is discouraged.

"It's a hassle to get time off from school because there is so much else to do. Also, no substitutes are provided."

"If the program is division sponsored and it looks good on the principal's record, it's easier to get permission to go."

"My principal encouraged me to get my certificate."

- Most teachers reported having some involvement in the selection and planning of professional development opportunities.

"We had a Wellness Day at the beginning of school. We had an all-staff assembly instead of mass communication."

"We have some say in the offerings at our school."

"The faculty advisory council asks us for ideas. Then the administration makes the decisions."

- A majority of the teachers indicated that information from professional development opportunities was sometimes shared at faculty meetings, with grade level teams, or informally with colleagues. All participants noted that sharing of the knowledge gained by individuals is an activity that should be expanded; otherwise, a valuable resource is being overlooked.

"Our staff meeting has time scheduled for reports from conferences, workshops, and textbook committees."

"Our team works well together. Sometimes we really share."

Teacher-Teacher Interactions

- The need for more teacher-teacher interaction was stated repeatedly by all participants.

- Interactions among teachers generally seemed to fall into two categories: talking in the lounge and small group interactions. The lounge discussion was described as "letting off steam" and "not usually constructive sharing." More meaningful interactions were reported in small groups. These interactions were characterized as supportive and trust-building.

"We talk in the counselor's office after school. It's not like the teachers' lounge where they nit pick all the time."

"We talk about frustrations, joys, neat things. We share ideas with special people in small groups."

"On our team, we help each other. We encourage each other not to blame and not to take blame, but to love and care about students and each other."

- While most of the teachers described positive relationships with their peers, two group members shared different perspectives.

"I have been brushed off by colleagues on my grade level. Ideas are never shared with me. I feel independent and alone."

"Our school is too big for the kind of teacher-teacher interaction you would like. There is a tone of destructive competitiveness between some teachers."

Teacher-Administrator Interactions

- A range of responses, from very positive to extremely negative, described teachers' perceptions of their relationship and interaction with their principal.

"My principal is well-meaning but scattered."

"I am distrustful of my principal because she went back on her word."

"Our principal talks to 10-15 teachers out of 70 on the faculty."

"My principal is well organized."

"Our principal is wonderful, caring, and healing. He is a good communicator and models the behavior he wants."

"He sets teachers up to fail if he thinks they are bad. He fosters distrust and poor morale. There is no cohesion in the school, but what can you do? They have all the power."

Teacher-Student Interactions

- Participants usually described interactions among students and teachers in positive terms.

"If students are respected then they respect the adults, too."

"Having a guidance counselor in the school has a positive effect on student-teacher interactions."

"Some students 'fall through the cracks' if discipline is not consistently enforced or if there is limited contact with the parents."

Parent-Community-School Interactions

- Teachers in this region reported a variety of techniques used to communicate with parents.

"A parent conference log is required by the school division. We also send notes home, make phone calls to parents, and send a weekly progress report."

"To keep in touch, I call the child's home. If there is no phone in the home, I go to the house to talk with parents. So far I have made 650 contacts this year, including progress reports, school newspaper, and office reminders."

- One teacher described active parent participation in the school.

"Lots of parents volunteer in our school. My job is still intact because parents insisted on having arts instruction for their children."

School Decisionmaking and Change

- Most of the teachers reported having input into decisions but no decisionmaking authority. Advisory councils, faculty councils, school improvement teams, and departmental meetings were noted as vehicles for input.

"The principal consulted the faculty on Title I status of the school last year. That is the only thing we were consulted on."

"I am on the advisory council. We often deal with mandates from on high."

"None of the really important decisions are made by teachers."

"Teachers are involved in decisions by giving input to the faculty advisory council, composed of grade level and subject area representatives. The council meets once a month with the principal to talk about problems teachers are having."

- Teachers expressed the desire to be more involved in school decisionmaking.

"I would like more freedom to make choices about instructional materials and texts."

"We are not communicating as well as we have in the past. We are not meeting like we did. I don't know where decisions are coming from."

The final question posed to the group was meant to provide the opportunity for teachers to summarize their perceptions about their working conditions. Sample responses reflect the professionalism and dedication evident in this group.

- When I get up in the morning, I feel__ because ___.

"I look forward to it. I'm excited, but tense. I wonder what is going to happen today."

"I feel tired because I haven't finished yesterday's work."

"Hopeful because I like what I do."

"Positive because everyday is a new challenge to a good teacher."

Central Virginia Region

This region includes inner-city urban areas, sprawling suburbs, and small rural divisions. Student population in the school divisions ranges from 1,500 to 37,000. The local composite index represents the low to middle range of .34 to .58.

Five teachers representing both rural and urban schools participated in the interview. Their teaching assignments ranged from elementary to secondary in grade level with one itinerant teacher, three regular classroom teachers, and one parttime teacher.

When asked to describe their working conditions in two or three words, the teachers' responses ranged from **open communication** to **harried and hurried**. Both positive and negative factors were cited as having great impact on their working conditions.

"I feel greatly appreciated. This means a lot to me."

"Good rapport with other teachers and the principal."

"We just can't seem to look forward. The history of racial problems always influences everything that goes on."

After offering these initial reactions, the group discussed other issues that affect teacher working conditions.

Resources/Instructional Materials

- Most teachers expressed satisfaction with the quality and quantity of instructional materials.

"We have no problem getting instructional materials. They are available."

"Teachers are allotted a certain amount of materials. We are rarely turned down, because the school board has directed that supplies not be held back from teachers."

"Because of lack of money for instructional materials, we got one case of paper to last for the year. Teachers are using their own money to buy needed materials."

- Only one teacher in the group indicated dissatisfaction with the selection process for instructional materials.

"Although teachers in my locality are on the selection committee, if you're not the right teacher from the right school, your opinion is not taken into consideration."

Facilities/Class Size

- Teachers described a number of factors in the physical environment of their school that negatively affect teaching and learning.

"We are too crowded to use the whole language approach. Thirty-five sixth graders are packed in wall-to-wall. There is no room to move, and desks have to be in rows to fit in the room."

"With limited space you are limited in what you can offer in an art program. I teach art in the back of the auditorium in one school."

"Our school was built in the 1930's. We have no air conditioning, and the ceiling tiles are falling out."

"Simple things make a difference in instruction. A screen to show slides on makes a difference! I have had to tape white paper on the wall. When another teacher offered her screen, I felt so professional to be able to show slides that way.

- All participants cited problems with class size, either in their own classes or in other classes in their school.

"Students need more individual attention, but

because of the class size it's hard to do that. That's where instruction suffers."

"When they add in specialist teachers (e.g., music) with regular classroom teachers, the average class size looks pretty good: 19, 20. But some of our classes have 35 students."

"There seems to be a problem with the way class size is determined. It's not working out right in everyday practice."

Professional Development

- All teachers in this interview expressed dissatisfaction with the types of professional development opportunities offered by their school or division. Most felt the inservice programs did not meet their needs.

  "Since I teach Latin, our inservice is not valid for me."

  "We don't have meetings with all the art teachers, and that's a problem. We have regulations to stay at our schools, and we can't get together to improve."

  "Seventh and eighth grade teachers had to sit for four hours and listen to a presentation on the new elementary reading program. Nothing applied to them, and it was very frustrating."

- Several teachers reported little or no involvement in the selection and planning of professional development activities.

  "Administration at the building level decides what teachers will participate in, depending on interest and availability. Teachers have some input, but the principal plans inservice."

  "The central office dictates inservice."

  "Teachers had to stay until 5:00 p.m. for one inservice. When teachers have to stay late, they can't do things they need to do, such as doctor's appointments."

- Although most of the teachers felt they were encouraged to participate in professional development activities outside the school, they reported problems with getting professional leave and reimbursement.

  "Teachers are encouraged to be involved, but they have to attend after school. People are denied leave to attend conferences."

  "Professional leave was caught by the budget axe. We not only have to take a personal day, but often it results in internal class coverage."

Teacher-Teacher Interactions

- All participants agreed that talking with other teachers is a positive and supportive activity. However, only two of the teachers reported that they felt free to talk with their colleagues anytime and anywhere at school.

  "I think if it weren't for teachers being able to talk with each other, a lot of us would not continue to teach."

  "We have breakfast together in the mornings in the lounge. We are encouraged to talk about anything and to try to come up with solutions."

  "Our high school is so big that I talk mainly with teachers who share my planning period."

  "We have so little time to meet with other teachers. We need a set time when teachers can get together without the administrators to talk through concerns. But we're really not allowed to do that."

- Most of the teachers described positive changes in their teaching or in school policies that have resulted from teacher-teacher interactions.

  "I use a behavior modification program that came from teacher-teacher interaction."

  "We get more things done. More talk means our inservice is better. As a group, we decide what we want."

"Teachers exchange materials on all kinds of things frequently. We also discuss student behavior and help new teachers solve their problems."

"We have more policy changes as a result of teachers talking. I think that's why they sometimes discourage teachers from talking with each other."

Teacher-Administrator Interactions

- When asked what word best characterized their principal, teachers in the focus group responded with various descriptions including **good, supportive, confused, reactionary,** and **dictatorial**.

- Teachers' perceptions also varied on how their principals interacted with the faculty.

"Often we don't agree with what he does, but we're able to tell him that we don't agree and he listens. Sometimes he can change it, and sometimes that's just the way it is."

"The administration will not accept responsibility for anything. The principal deals with a problem by threatening the whole faculty but never backing up the threats with action."

- About half of the teachers expressed satisfaction with their relationship with their principal. Similarly, the teachers also provided examples of principal behaviors that caused their satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

"Our principal meets teachers' needs. Those of us with elderly parents, handicapped children, or other special needs, find him letting us adjust our schedules around those special needs."

"The teachers are afraid that if they confront the principal he will retaliate with bad evaluations and bad class schedules. That kind of principal makes or breaks the teachers' morale, and that affects the students."

"I think it's very sad that there's no way a bad principal can be moved before the situation deteriorates so badly that something has to be done."

Teacher-Student Interactions

- Teachers' perceptions of students' feelings about school were varied. Teachers reported that students' feelings about their school are often influenced by factors in the school environment.

"We have good rapport with students. Students are brought into a family environment at our school. They respect the teachers."

"Student attitudes at my school are divided along racial lines." Black students seem to have more school pride and more positive attitudes toward the school than white students."

"Most kids like to come to school."

- Many of the teachers agreed that the relationship between teachers and students differs from class to class, and whether or not the relationship is good may depend on the teacher's attitude.

"We have a discipline referral program. Teachers are consistent in referring students for lunchtime detention. The consistency helps. Kids hate lunch detention."

"Grouping students has led to some hard feelings between teachers and students because of different expectations for different groups."

"There are many students and teachers at my school who interact without any racial influences. Although racial tensions have improved, they are still not easily acknowledged and dealt with. It seems as if people are afraid to discuss the issue of racial tensions because they think feelings/emotions will ignite."

- Most of the teachers reported that achievement and behavior expectations for students vary greatly from teacher to teacher.

"I am opposed to the Talented/Gifted program

because I feel that all students are talented and gifted. What is good for one student is good for all."

"The In-School Suspension Program doesn't work. A teacher sends a student to ISS, and then the person in charge of ISS says the reason listed is stupid and sends the student back to class."

"The faculty uses Assertive Discipline for dealing with the large number of at-risk students in our school. The consequences of positive and negative behavior are clear to students."

Parent-Community-School Interactions

- Parent-community involvement in the schools in this region was generally reported to be active. In some cases, teachers felt parents have too much input into what goes on at school.

  "We have a resource directory of parents and community members who will come in to help teach."

  "There is a parent-superintendent committee in the city. The superintendent acts on their concerns immediately, often without checking on the implications."

  "There is lots of parent involvement with my Latin classes. However, schoolwide parent involvement is not so good."

  "The administration wants to have parents very involved in school. Sometimes the faculty feels left out—not part of the decisionmaking. For example, parents were invited to sit in on classes, but teachers were not involved in that decision."

- Teachers mentioned various ways in which they communicate with parents of the children they teach.

  "At the beginning of the year, I send a letter home to parents. I include my home phone number and ask them to give me a call if they have any problems."

  "We schedule long parent-teacher conference days to accommodate parents. We also make phone calls home on discipline and academics."

School Goals and Objectives

- A majority of the teachers expressed little ownership of goals and objectives that were mandated by the division or school administration.

  "We get directives from the school board office when the superintendent is upset about something. As long as you can create the appearance that something is being done, it is more important than if anything is actually done. Things are forgotten as soon as they are written down."

  "The superintendent says that each student will achieve at or above his level. It doesn't matter if you keep a child from committing suicide. It just matters that test scores are high."

  "Mission statements have been developed by every school in the county. I got one to post in the room, but I don't remember anything about it."

- Some teachers reported that faculties set their own goals and objectives based on curricular themes.

  "At the beginning of the year, we decide on schoolwide goals to work on as a faculty. However, we forget them by mid-year. It would be good to remind us at faculty meetings what goals we have chosen."

  "We do a self-evaluation and set individual goals at the beginning of the year. This is done again at the end of the year and put together with the administrator's evaluation."

School-Based Decisionmaking and Change

- Most teachers expressed frustration at having no involvement with decisionmaking at the division level.

"The superintendent called an emergency faculty meeting at 8:15 a.m. to announce that the principal was being moved to another school. He just made the announcement and dismissed the group. This is typical of how changes are made from higher up—abrupt, quick, short, and to the point, with no tact."

"We were directed by the school board to create three groupings of students—honors, average to high average, and at-risk. We've been told not to send at-risk students to in-school suspension or detention hall. We must show on paper that they are achieving."

"Teachers need to see some results of their responding to surveys and being on committees. We get tired of doing the same old busy work. The school board does what it wants anyway."

- Although some of the participants indicated they had involvement in school decisionmaking, others expressed concerns about their lack of involvement in decisions directly affecting them and their students.

"Teachers have input in the building through the faculty advisory committee and department chair meetings."

"Now that we have input at school, we are treated as professionals."

"Administrators need to involve teachers in decisions about instructional time at the elementary level. Thirty minutes is insufficient time for an art teacher to prepare for and teach an art class. If teachers aren't given enough time, quality instruction will suffer."

"There is an appearance of teacher involvement in decisionmaking at my school, but in the end teachers' recommendations are not followed."

Personnel Policies

- Most teachers reported that division personnel policies were inconsistent and punitive.

"Although the teacher evaluation cycle is every three years, this policy is not implemented consistently. Some teachers have been singled out and put on special assistance. Now it's all up to the principal. Teachers have no way to let anyone know what's going on in the school."

"At the school level, policies are dealt with equitably. At the county level, it depends on who you are, who your friends are, and who you know at the school board."

"The policy on leave time contained punitive language that assumed teachers were unprofessional and would violate the policy. "

"The drug policy treats teachers like students."

- Teachers representing school divisions in the Central region of Virginia reported differing perspectives on the quality of their working conditions. However, common to all were positive feelings about their students and colleagues.

"When I get up in the morning, my feelings are positive because I love my students and the faculty members are my family."

Valley Region

The Shenandoah Valley region of Virginia is characterized by small city and rural school divisions with student populations ranging from 2,000 to 6,900. The local composite index is in the middle range—from .39 to .60.

The seven teachers who participated in this interview represented a wide range of experience. Three teachers taught in elementary schools, two in middle schools, and two in high schools. A special education teacher, an itinerant music teacher, and two physical education teachers were included in the group.

On the basis of information provided by participants in the interview, it would appear that teacher working conditions in the Shenandoah Valley ranged from poor to almost ideal. When teachers were asked to describe their working conditions in

two or three words, these were some of the representative responses:

"Supportive, cooperative, and friendly."

"Exciting but chaotic."

"Tense. Low morale."

A majority of the teachers in this interview indicated that the principal had the greatest impact on their working conditions.

"The administrator sets the tone in the building."

"We have a weak administrator. This has caused many teachers to transfer."

Resources/Instructional Materials

- Teachers were generally satisfied with their involvement in the selection of textbooks and resources.

"The principal gave teachers complete freedom to choose textbooks."

"We have an ongoing textbook selection committee."

- Most teachers felt that budget cuts had affected the quantity and quality of instructional resources, particularly supplementary material and resources for special classes.

"Manipulatives and other supplementary materials are not readily available. Teachers often have to take it out of pocket."

"I have difficulty finding appropriate materials for special education classes."

"Growing class size often means not enough books."

"History, math, and science get everything they want, but other classes, like health, don't."

- Teachers indicated both advantages and disadvantages to the lack of resources available to them.

"It's made me a more creative, innovative teacher because I have to make many of my own materials."

"Materials need to change often and be updated. It's better to develop/revise your own."

"Lack of materials/equipment causes low morale."

"Instructional time is affected by lack of resources. Because of the shortage of textbooks, if you want it read, it has to be read in class."

Facilities/Class Size

- Most teachers were satisfied with their class size. However, they expressed concern that class size would "creep up" as money got tight.

"My largest class is 25. Many of the others are very small. With budget cuts and attrition, they may increase."

"Class size is creeping up in the early grades."

"In large physical education classes, all students cannot be helped. Injuries can be a problem."

- Most teachers described well-maintained facilities with adequate instructional space. There were three notable exceptions.

"Every school in my division is air conditioned except for the gymnasium and physical education offices."

"More than once I have put on a scarf and something over my mouth to get the asbestos off my shelves."

"The building is old and dirty. Things are not repaired, and there are insufficient student desks. All this makes the kids more antsy, especially in the afternoon."

Professional Development

- Teachers expressed satisfaction with the quality and quantity of professional development opportunities. They described professional development as **excellent, ongoing, and better than it's ever been.**

  "I remember the days when everybody in the school system sat in one workshop. That has changed—now when there is an inservice day there are activities to meet different needs."

  "We have wellness days when we try to get back in shape. I wish we had more of those. The division pays for bowling, arts/crafts, etc."

  "We've all come out of the peer coaching program feeling it's a good thing. We've been forced to get out of our little baliwick and see what other teachers are doing."

  "On our professional days (in the building), we generally have a structured meeting of some kind in the morning. In the afternoon, we read professional journals. Sometimes we moan and groan (about the reading), but we get a lot of information that we don't have time to get otherwise."

- Teachers in this region felt strongly encouraged to participate in professional development opportunities. However, reimbursement for expenses was not provided by all systems."

  "It's easier to get professional leave than sick leave at our school."

  "My assistant principal has encouraged me for a couple of years to get my masters."

  "One drawback we have in our county, because of budget constraints, is reimbursement. We haven't been reimbursed for college courses for several years."

  "Money for professional development was first to be cut from the budget."

  "We get support from the system for the training needed to implement new/required programs."

- All teachers in the interview indicated they had input into planning of professional development. They were also encouraged to share what they had learned.

  "Teachers are encouraged to work with a partner and present a workshop."

  "We are encouraged to share in department meetings or faculty meetings."

  "Our principal is eager to send us out to learn new things as long as we bring it back and share it."

Teacher-Teacher Interactions

- Teachers described a variety of interactions with their colleagues. Most of their interactions are job-related because "the school day is so busy there's no time left for socializing."

  "We have 'let's talk' every Tuesday after school. Teachers help each other solve problems. The principal doesn't attend unless he's asked."

  "Sometimes it helps to vent those frustrations. There's a lot of trying to help the other guy laugh at a situation."

  "When we talk, we talk about students."

- Teachers agreed that positive changes have occurred as a result of supportive teacher-teacher interaction.

  "Peer observation has been good. It's made some changes in all of us—in our teaching techniques."

  "A group of us attended whole language workshops together. We continue to meet at lunch to support each other, share books, and talk about literature. It's amazing how much the children have benefitted from our interaction."

  "Special education teachers remind me to write things on the board. I do too much oral direction-giving."

Teacher-Administrator Interactions

- Teachers characterized their principals in a variety of ways. They agreed that a good principal could create good working conditions where they would not have otherwise existed. Likewise, they agreed that "a bad administrator is really hell on earth."

  "He leaves notes in our mailboxes thanking us for things we've done like chaperoning a dance."

  "He gives the teachers what they need—help when they need it, a joke when they need it, and criticism when they need it."

  "He pits one group of teachers against another to take the heat off himself."

  "He's a politician. He says one thing and does another."

- Teachers praised principals who were: **supportive, available, people-oriented, discreet, intellectually stimulating, understanding, liked kids,** and **trusted their staff**. Teachers agree they worked harder for those principals.

  "You'd do anything for those people."

- Teachers indicated they were frustrated and confused by principals who were: **workaholics, domineering, self-absorbed, not really interested in kids or education,** or **punitive**.

  "If one person does something, the whole faculty is going to hear about it. Instead of dealing with that one person, she has us all in there and we all have to listen. You feel like,'what have I done?'"

  "Our principal says, 'it's my decision.' He makes no bones about it."

Teacher-Student Interactions

- Most of the teachers described their students as **happy** and **well disciplined**. They offered a variety of techniques used to foster positive relationships with their students.

  "Each teacher in our school 'adopts' one at-risk student at the beginning of the year. We give them personal attention, guidance, and assistance."

  "We are using Assertive Discipline. Every teacher in the school has the same expectations. That's really helped."

  "We use a 'no failure' approach to student achievement. There is a group—in the school and community—that works with the child and provides needed assistance/support."

Parent-Community-School Interactions

- Most of the teachers described positive interaction and involvement with parents and community. They also indicated that parent/community support had positive effects on student performance.

  "We send 'Positive Powers' (a note or phone call) to two students in each class twice a month. "The kids love it, and so do the parents."

  "Tutors from the University of Virginia help bridge the gap between home and school by providing parent education classes and by tutoring students. It's been so positive in improving self-esteem as well as academics."

School Goals and Objectives

- Most teachers reported involvement in setting goals for themselves and their school. Where this process worked well there was a sense of consensus, and teachers felt motivated and responsible.

  "It's meaningful. If you have any pride in your school, you don't want to see it miss too many of those goals. After all, you're the ones who set them up."

- One teacher expressed frustration with a personal goal-setting procedure in his school.

"Personal goals for each teacher are established at the beginning of the year by teacher and principal together. It always ends up with the goals they (administrators) want you to work on. When the principal evaluates you, he says, 'you did not achieve a certain goal.'"

School Decisionmaking and Change

- Most teachers in this region felt they had some impact on school decisions. However, some teachers did not feel they could influence decisions because of "top down" decisionmaking processes.

"Decisions about instruction and transferring students from one teacher to another are left up to the interdisciplinary teams. The principal makes policy decisions."

"When we had a problem with late buses, the teachers on bus duty got together and decided what they wanted to do. They made the recommendation to the principal, and it was accepted. It's working!"

"We use superintendent's and principal's advisory committees."

"The principal is not always to blame (when teachers are excluded from participating in decisions that affect them). The superintendent makes a unilateral decision and then informs those under him."

Personnel Policies

- Some teachers indicated that personnel policies related to reduction in force and transfers adversely affected their working conditions.

"RIF is decided by the principal. He may ask for input, but he doesn't necessarily consider it when making the decision about which teachers will be cut or transferred."

"The principal transferred students out of a certain high school program in order to get rid of the teacher. Once the students were gone, the teacher didn't have a job. Later, they renamed the position and hired another teacher."

"Some principals block a teacher's request for transfer because they think it reflects badly on them."

- In some cases, working together as Virginia Education Association members helped teachers to affect a change in policy.

"We made a presentation to them (central administration). We got a lot of things out in the open. They listened, and now they have a new transfer policy that is much more to our liking."

A majority of the teachers expressed positive feelings about their job as they responded to the last question in the interview: When I get up in the morning, I feel ___ because_____.

"excited .. . teaching is a never-ending challenge."

"positive. . .because I can open up the world for first graders and see their excitement."

"I'm somber now because of the conditions that the principal is laying down."

"I enjoy teaching, but the fight for money all the time is demoralizing. People need a pat on the back and recognition that what we're doing is important."

Roanoke Area Region

This region is characterized by small city, suburban, and rural school divisions. Student population ranges from 1,300 to 14,300. The composite index is relatively low—.30 to .46.

Six teachers representing elementary, middle, and high school regular and special education classes participated in the Roanoke area interview. When asked to describe their working conditions in two or three words, these teachers offered varied perceptions.

"Stressful, unprofessional, demoralized."

"Independent, lonely, isolated."

"Pleasant, friendly."

"Caring and supportive."

Teacher-administrator relations, students, and school organization—in that order—were perceived by this group of teachers as having the greatest impact on their working conditions.

"There seems to be a prevailing belief in my division that high levels of stress lead to more teacher productivity."

"The adjustment we've had to make in going from a 'people-oriented' principal to the 'new wave, non-people-oriented' type has had a tremendous negative impact on our working conditions."

"I feel completely inadequate and frustrated about dealing with students who have substance abuse problems. We're getting more 'crack' babies entering school now."

"Moving to the middle school concept and teaming while running a traditional program has been very stressful."

Resources/Instructional Materials

- Most teachers were satisfied with the quality and quantity of instructional materials. However, many teachers expressed concerns about the availability of funds for supplementary materials.

"We have adequate funds for supplementary material this year because local businesses and parent groups have helped. I don't know what will happen next year."

"Our division adopts new textbooks, but phases in their purchase."

"I have to pay for copies of tests and skill sheets made on the school copier."

- Most teachers reported some involvement in the selection of instructional resources. However, they cited problems with the selection and purchase of materials due to budget constraints.

"I wish we could adopt dual reading series for elementary grades. This, along with trade books, would provide greater flexibility in meeting students' needs. But budget concerns prevent this."

"Teacher committee recommendations are not always purchased by the administration. Final decisions are often made based on cost of materials rather than on teacher recommendations."

Facilities/Class Size

- Most teachers indicated dissatisfaction with the physical environment in which they teach. Deteriorating facilities, climate control, and instructional space were the most notable concerns.

"If we could just get a new roof, we'd be able to keep the new carpet we just got."

"I teach in a storage closet with no ventilation and tubs of chemicals sitting around."

"In my school, children go from a room that is 90 degrees to one that is 60 degrees."

"There are health problems among the staff and students because of the closed environment. The building is air conditioned, but there are no windows."

"I teach in a situation where there are movable walls that don't move. I have 30 students, eight of them learning disabled. I can hear three other teachers instructing students."

"Our building looks good on the surface, but I have no water, lab tables, or storage in my science classroom."

- Teachers felt that class size needed to be smaller. They also indicated that the method of reporting class size to the Department of Education was inequitable.

"In our division, a teacher at one school in an affluent area had 14 students, while at another school in a low socio-economic area a teacher at the same grade level had 42 students."

"Classes should not be larger than 25 students, especially where special needs students are mainstreamed."

"We had an aide hired to help with an oversized class, but she was pulled from the classroom after an hour and a half each day to perform other duties."

Professional Development

- Teachers' perceptions about professional development opportunities were generally negative in this region. Many teachers indicated dissatisfaction with the quality of professional development activities and the fact that many were mandatory.

  "I may have learned three new things in eight years, but if you don't go you get docked."

  "I served on a committee which met with the central administrative staff to set professional development goals. We planned college courses, association-sponsored workshops, and individual school-sponsored workshops. A lot of after school hours were spent on this project, but it was never implemented."

  "It's unfair that elementary teachers in our division are mandated to attend inservice but middle and high school teachers are not."

  "I see inservice days as days I could use to plan, and I resent having to go play patty cake!"

- The ability to secure professional leave and reimbursement for expenses incurred for professional development opportunities such as college classes varied throughout the region.

  "My county paid for six half-days of released time for me to attend training in cooperative learning."

  "I'm encouraged to participate in professional development because I'm the association president. I have no problem getting professional leave, and I get reimbursement for conference expenses when I attend."

  "Teachers are reluctant to take part in professional development opportunities due to cost."

  "We must pay for a substitute if we have professional leave for conferences. We get no reimbursement for college courses."

- Most teachers indicated that they shared information from workshops and other professional development activities informally with their colleagues.

  "Most sharing is on an informal basis with teachers who want to hear."

  "If we attend a workshop, we are required to provide an inservice for the faculty."

  "We share what we have learned in team meetings."

- Most teachers in this interview reported having little or no involvement in planning and implementing professional development activities.

  "We are forced to attend mandatory inservice programs on topics like asbestos removal that have little relevance to our work."

  "Inservice is geared to regular classroom teachers, but special education, physical education, and itinerant teachers must attend it."

  "Teachers were involved in a needs assessment that was to match their needs with college courses and inservice workshops, but there was never any follow through from the central office."

  "We're able to plan some school workshops, but if they flop we are to blame."

Teacher-Teacher Interactions

- A majority of the teachers described infrequent and informal interactions with their colleagues. Teachers agreed that administrators and organizational structures can influence the quantity and quality of teacher interactions.

"A group of us get together on Friday afternoon after school just to socialize."

"There is a close network of support between members of our team. We have a team planning meeting on Thursday after school."

"We have a daily two-and-one-half-hour team planning time."

"We have a new principal who told the faculty, 'I don't want to see you talking with another teacher.'"

"Our superintendent has stated that teachers should talk only about positive things with their peers."

- Most teachers indicated that they give and get support through teacher-teacher interactions.

"When there is a lot of positive interaction with peers, it is beneficial to me."

"Our principal assigns mentors for beginning teachers. Since I've been around for a while, I'm considered the 'grand dame.' I explain school culture to new teachers."

"In our school, we share ideas and trade off when we find something workable."

Teacher-Administrator Interactions

- Teachers characterized their principals in a variety of terms, both positive and negative.

"My principal is understanding. He's always willing to listen, even if it upsets him."

"My principal is in charge. She's consistent in demeanor whether things are going well or not. She's human. However, she becomes authoritative and does not always support teachers in matters of discipline."

"She's always professional. She's never forgotten that she was a teacher, and she doesn't criticize when a teacher approaches her with a problem. She gives us flexibility and leeway."

"My principal is ambivalent. He says 'yes sir' to parents, and then jumps the teachers. I need at times to jump back, even in conferences, to support my position."

"She is untrustworthy. I've seen her do unreliable and untrue things with parents. We go in daily and play 'nice-nice' with each other, but we don't trust each other."

- Most teachers described open, professional interactions and satisfaction with relationships with their principals.

"He is open, friendly, and available in the halls between classes. We express opinions on all major decisions."

"I'm very satisfied. Although our discussions are generally professional, not personal, she is nurturing and supportive."

"My principal will listen, but you must carry through on your ideas. Some folks have whatever they ask for, but others couldn't 'bring him cheesecake.'"

- Many teachers felt that their principals were inconsistent in meeting faculty needs.

"We get the shotgun effect—everyone gets punished if one misbehaves."

"Our principal makes a valiant attempt to meet the needs of 70 teachers in two buildings."

"We go to 'sacred cows' to make particular requests."

"We are treated equitably—all bad."

Teacher-Student Interactions

- Although most teachers perceived that students like coming to their school, they described a number of problems with teacher-student interactions.

"Our students love being in teams."

"Middle school has helped teacher-student relationships. I'm with them more and develop better rapport."

"Students have too much freedom and they lack respect for the teachers."

"Teachers' efforts at discipline are hampered by a lack of parental support and by administrative inconsistency, both at the building and central office."

"Principals tread softly on discipline because of fear of litigation by parents. They tend to allow a few students to disrupt the instruction of others."

- Most teachers agreed that levels of expectations for students were high.

"If a child fails, the teacher has failed. This permeates our system."

"Our expectation for students is to 'be the best that you can be.'"

"Expectations for students are greater than ever. What used to be expected of my first graders is now expected of kindergarten students. Much of this is out of sync with their developmental level."

"We may be doing more for all children, but actually expecting less."

"Student absences due to extracurricular events lower academic expectations."

Parent-Community-School Interactions

- Teachers' perceptions of parent-community involvement in school varied. From the comments in this interview, the highest level of involvement appears to be in the elementary schools.

"Our school has a volunteer program that is out of this world. The PTA is strong and helps purchase materials and equipment. Also, we have Helping Hands, a parent program that provides for needy children."

"We have a communitywide volunteer program. Volunteers are trained to assist with screening of students, etc. The downside of this is that if the community wants something, chances are they're going to get it."

"We have good volunteers who serve in the library or office, listen to individual students read, and go on field trips. However, in many households both parents have jobs and cannot volunteer."

"Our volunteers work in the office, but they seem reluctant to assist with individual teachers' requests or to work with students."

- Most teachers expressed the desire to improve school-home communication and parent involvement.

"Too often, those we want to involve cannot or do not become involved with their children's education."

"Teachers are making more effort to communicate with the home by writing notes, scheduling conferences throughout the year, providing interim reports, and making phone calls."

"We try to make home or job visits if other methods of contacting parents are unsuccessful and the situation becomes acute."

"I think we need to explore more parent education. I am concerned about the number of indigent and latchkey children, the inconsistency in parenting skills, and lack of parental interest in what goes on at school."

School Goals and Objectives

Few teachers in this group felt ownership for school or division goals because most of them did not participate in the decisionmaking process.

"The superintendent didn't like the goals designed by the systemwide committee, so he rewrote them."

"Improved test scores and lower drop-out rates were our systemwide goals. The method of reporting the drop-out rate was changed so this goal could be achieved."

"Our evaluation process requires each teacher to have a systemwide goal, a school goal, and three personal goals—something showy that looks good."

"Teachers, parents, and students are involved in setting goals for our school."

- Most teachers expressed a sense of responsibility for their school's successes and failures.

"I feel a strong sense of responsibility for my school and students. Our school has always been on a pedestal. We want to hold that up."

"Our school is split. We have some very dedicated teachers, and others who come and leave with the buses."

"If you had asked me last year, I would have said yes. This year we're treated unprofessionally—like children. With this loss went the professionalism."

"Teacher morale affects our feeling of responsibility. We need to feel ownership for school goals and decisions."

School Decisionmaking and Change

- Teachers in this group reported various levels and types of involvement with school decisionmaking. Several teachers indicated changes had been effected as a result of their participation in the decisionmaking process.

"When we changed from the junior high concept to middle school, we were totally in control of the situation. We had the say in how the sixth grade program would be set up. Seventh grade teachers will be involved next year."

"A change in inservice came about from teachers' complaints to the superintendent after complaints to the principal had been ineffective."

"Department chairs and coordinators make recommendations to the faculty for consideration."

"Input is encouraged through the principal's advisory council, but he retains veto power."

"We had a committee last year that discussed suggestions/concerns from the faculty, but the teachers did not know how to handle it. Lack of training turned the committee meetings into a gripe session, and the committee voted to disband."

- Several teachers recommended changes in the school decisionmkaing process.

"I'd like to see us use a site-based decisionmaking approach."

"I'd like to see the principal make decisions."

"In order for school-based decisionmaking to be successful, teachers need extensive training in the process and in how to reach consensus."

Personnel Policies

- Teachers cited examples of inconsistencies between written policies and actual practices.

"In our division, personnel policies are often supplanted by 'administrative procedures.' These procedures are frequently modified during the school year."

"Regulations explain how to implement a policy (for example personal leave), yet there will be 15 different interpretations. The superintendent is reluctant to enforce policies."

"The interpretation of policies varies from principal to principal. However, if it's questioned it is followed more consistently."

- One teacher expressed frustration with his division's transfer policy.

  "Special education teachers are locked in to their positions. There is little opportunity for transfer, and we're not allowed to apply for regular classroom positions for which we are qualified. Once an LD teacher, always an LD teacher."

To close the interview, participants were asked to summarize their perceptions of teacher working conditions. All but one of the closing comments reflected positive feelings.

"I love teaching first grade. There's nowhere else you can spend a day that fresh, free, and open."

I'm optimistic. With the kind of support I'm getting in my building, I enjoy teaching."

"My attitude is poor. I get a pit in my stomach that stays there from Sunday evening until Friday because of the lack of respect for teachers and the poor public attitude toward education. I'm sick of people who complain but won't take a stand or file a grievance."

Southwest Region

The Southwest region is composed of small rural school divisions with student populations ranging from 2,700 to 10,000. The composite index is the lowest of any other region in Virginia—.24 to .33.

A group of nine teachers, representing all grade levels and including Chapter I, special education, and vocational education, discussed their perceptions of working conditions in their schools. The following quotations are indicative of the range of responses to the initial question: "What two or three words best describe working conditions in your school?"

"Cooperative, challenging, and pleasant."

"Energy-requiring, family-oriented."

"Dysfunctional, noncohesive, and inconsistent."

"Strained, superficial, and competitive."

A majority of the participants agreed that the principal has the greatest impact on working conditions in the school.

"The principal sets the tone for the school."

"He's just waiting to catch us doing something wrong."

"Our principal doesn't perceive discipline problems as the teachers do, and he doesn't deal with them in ways that teachers feel are effective."

"The principal is a puppet of the superintendent. We can never get an honest answer."

Resources/Instructional Materials

- Teaching assignment seemed to influence the degree of satisfaction participants felt with the quality and quantity of instructional materials.

  "State money needs to be increased for vocational programs. We have no textbook replacement schedule."

  "I'm limited to 50 Xerox copies per month. I'm paying up to $20 per month out of pocket for Xeroxing."

  "I buy necessities with my budget. The niceties, such as materials for science experiments, I have to borrow from the university or buy out of pocket."

  "I have Chapter I funds available, and my principal also orders materials for me."

- Several teachers indicated that the lack of resources altered their teaching.

  "Sharing textbooks with another teacher limits what you can do."

"Since there are no textbooks for my humanities class, I have to use other resources such as video tapes and guest speakers. This is sometimes difficult for a substitute to handle."

- Most teachers reported being involved in the selection of textbooks and other instructional resources.

"I have input into the supervisor's budget to select materials and into the selection process."

"Teachers select textbooks. However, parents may complain/intervene when the books are on display. Teachers are fearful because of a previous textbook protest."

"A central committee, with parents, narrows the choice to two or three texts. Then each teacher reviews the choices. As a grade group in the school, teachers select which text they will use."

"Every department should have a budget and should be allowed to use it when they need supplementary materials. Also, they should be allowed to carry the money over from year to year."

Facilities/Class Size

- Descriptions of the physical environment of schools in this region varied tremendously. Several teachers attributed discrepancies and problems with instructional space to lack of funds or inappropriate use of funds.

"There is discrepancy among schools as to equipment, maintenance, etc. The state needs to put additional money into rural counties."

"They renovated the office and fixed the football field, but they didn't use the money where it's really needed."

"Hearing impaired students are in a classroom next to a saw mill that runs all day."

"We have a new technology room with fabulous equipment, but only two teachers are allowed to use it."

"The needs of the instructional program should drive building construction and equipment purchases."

- Class size varied throughout the region. Crowded classrooms were typical in more populated areas. However, teachers cited additional problems that contributed to inequities in class size.

"Interstates have affected the population shifts. Classrooms are crowded. We have no space for resource teachers (such as Chapter I) to work with students."

"At my school scheduling is uneven because of one-shot classes such as band. I have one history class with eight students and another with 30."

"The county makes you put students' names in another teacher's register when you have 'too many' students."

"Decrease in population has led to the creation of combined classes with one teacher having three or four grades."

Professional Development

- Most teachers expressed satisfaction with the number and types of professional development opportunities offered by their division or school.

"We have a lot of opportunities—some voluntary and some required."

"We have 30 hours of professional development required by our contract. There is a wide variety of classes, activities, conferences, etc. that may be used to fulfill the requirement and applied to recertification credit as well."

"Activities on work days are planned by teachers."

"Not enough professional development oppor-

tunities are offered in my system. You often have to travel and pay yourself to find enough activities to meet the requirements."

- Most teachers in this region felt they were encouraged to participate in professional development opportunities. However, some indicated problems with getting professional leave due to budget cuts.

  "Our principal is good about passing on information about professional development activities."

  "There is selective granting of [illegible]nal leave. If it's something that would [illegible] public relations, it is generally granted. We were not encouraged to attend VEA events."

  "Our principal promotes things that are on the superintendent's list."

  "Until budget cuts, I had never been refused professional leave or expenses for conferences. Now it's very difficult to get professional leave or a substitute."

  "There's no consistency—no policy on granting professional leave or paying expenses."

- Most teachers reported having input into the selection and planning of professional development activities.

  "Teacher input has improved professional development offerings."

  "Inservice has improved since we're not importing people and we're doing more of our own workshops."

  "Our superintendent said: 'Activities on work days should be dictated from the bottom up.'"

- Perceptions varied on the opportunities available to share information from professional development sessions.

  "Vocational teachers do more sharing. Supervisors have a lot to do with this by following up and scheduling a workshop."

  "I did a county and school workshop after I attended a conference on self-esteem, but I had to recruit people to attend."

  "If you share, you have to be pushy in getting the workshop organized yourself or convincing others to attend. You have to keep finding the right buttons to hit and the right people at the right time."

Teacher-Teacher Interactions

- Most teachers described brief, sporadic interactions with their colleagues between classes, at lunch, in the lounge, or at faculty meetings. These interactions were perceived as supportive and beneficial.

  "Some teachers I see only at faculty meetings."

  "We talk a lot in the lounge. I know a teacher who can always see things logically and help me solve a problem."

  "We have a family-oriented school. We gather in the lounge each morning and at lunch. We talk about what we're doing with students, we help solve problems, and we pep each other up. We always meet and say goodby at the end of the day."

  "We talk in the halls and in the lounge. It helps to know what other teachers are doing and to tie into it with your teaching."

  "We do things outside of school together, but we don't talk about school. This builds bonds of trust between us. During the school day, time prevents our interacting with each other."

- Several teachers reported positive changes in their teaching or in school policy as a result of teacher-teacher interactions.

  "We read and discussed the research on reading instruction, presented a proposal to alter our instruction, and the principal accepted it. Our instruction has improved as a result of our doing this together."

"The way I present things to other teachers has changed as a result of my being in their classroom as a special education teacher collaborating. Teachers know I am available to help, and they are more receptive."

Teacher-Administrator Interactions

- When asked to characterize their principal in one word, teachers indicated differing perceptions.

  "Caring—about teachers and students."

  "Approachable—open to teacher input."

  "Moody."

  "Unbending."

  "Dictatorial."

- Many teachers described negative interactions and relationships with their principals. Discipline problems seemed to be a prime area of discontent in teacher-administrator interactions.

  "He is laid back, but too lax with discipline."

  "The principal does not recognize and meet faculty needs because he doesn't follow through with what teachers want as far as student discipline is concerned."

  "Discipline is inconsistent. Who the child is determines the kind of discipline administered."

  "My principal's interactions with teachers are poor and unprofessional. He asks one teacher what others are doing."

  "You may pay next year for the battle you fight this year."

  "My principal is caring and seeks to meet our needs."

  "Our principal allowed us to have a 'stress session' after school as part of our wellness program, and we got recertification credit."

Teacher-Student Interactions

- Teachers' perceptions about students' feelings about school tended to be either very positive or very negative.

  "Our kids are either very positive or very negative. There is class consciousness—elitism from the 'haves,' and resentment from the 'have not' students."

  "Students don't seem too inspired to work hard. Many students have jobs that affect their performance in school. They seem to resent homework."

  "I don't think our students are proud of our county unless they're in band or athletics—things the superintendent promotes."

  "Students see school as a social time because they're so spread out in where they live."

  "For my lower socio-economic students, school is a safe place where they begin to feel better about themselves."

- Participants reported various levels of expectations for students."

  "Expectations for our students are not high enough. However, teachers in the honors program feel pressure and may push too hard for the wrong reasons."

  "Academics are not stressed in our division."

  "Teachers don't live in the community where they teach. This may make a difference in their expectations. Expectations have definitely been lowered."

  "We have high expectations for our students, but we don't always meet their individual needs."

Parent-School-Community Interactions

- From participants' responses, parent-school-community interaction seems to be more positive in the elementary schools. However, opportunities

exist in most schools for parent/community involvement.

"When parents intervene, they get action."

"There are many good opportunities for parent involvement in our county. They serve on textbook committees and as classroom tutors. Parents are encouraged to be involved, and their participation is welcome at our school."

"Our community fosters local history. People open their homes for students to visit and learn more about architecture, antiques, and community history."

- Living in small communities intensifies teachers' opportunities to communicate with students' parents.

"I live in the community and see parents often. They feel free to talk with me about their children's progress."

"I am required as an elementary teacher to have a conference at school with every parent or to make a home visit. Last year, out of 600 students, only 14 parents were not contacted, and that was their choice."

"High school teachers are required to contact 25 percent of their students' parents. We turn in the number of parents contacted, formally or informally, when we turn in our registers."

"We hold parent-teacher conferences in the late afternoon and early evening to accommodate parents who work."

School Decisionmaking and Change

- Teachers in this interview reported little involvement in school decisionmaking. Lack of communication and lack of time were mentioned as reasons why there wasn't more teacher involvement.

"Teachers never have opportunities to discuss things. There is so little time for us to get together."

"There should be time available during the school day for department meetings."

"Lack of communication is the problem. We're not treated as professionals."

"Teachers got together and suggested a better way to handle special assignments for students in in-school suspension. The principal accepted the suggestion and changed the process."

"Teachers turn in a list of what they want to teach, but they don't always get their requests."

Personnel Policies

- Teachers expressed concerns about policies dealing with leave time and transfers.

"A teacher was penalized on her evaluation because she took maternity leave and missed more than the allowed number of days."

"Administrators need to solve problems with teachers one-on-one instead of punishing everyone."

"Teachers sometimes hear about their transfer from students or others in the community rather than from an administrator. We are not treated as professionals."

Despite the concerns voiced about their working conditions, most teachers responded positively to the last question: "When I get up in the morning, I feel _____ because_____."

"My attitude is good because of the kids."

"I feel positive because I've changed myself."

"Negative. There are no real professional rewards other than working with children."

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

To describe current conditions for teaching and learning throughout Virginia was a major goal of this study. However, the authors also intend that *Surviving the Worst, Expecting the Best: Teacher Perceptions of Work Life in Virginia Schools* inform parents, teachers, administrators, and school boards who may act to improve local schools. Therefore, the following section provides reflections and recommendations that may stimulate discussions at the local and state levels about the adequacy of the environment in which teachers must practice their profession.

Based on data collected in focus group interviews with teachers representing all regions of Virginia, the authors make the following recommendations regarding ways to establish working conditions favorable to teaching and learning.

Teachers

1. Be assertive and seek greater involvement in school decisionmaking.
2. Keep up with current educational research and conduct action research in the classroom.
3. Raise your expectations for quality education.
4. Promoting collegiality and interact positively with administrators and the public.
5. Support your professional organizations.

Principals

1. Keep the school's focus on the students. Support/enhance classroom learning. Develop positive methods for promoting teacher and administrator accountability for student outcomes.
2. Be consistent in interactions with teachers and students, and be sensitive to teachers' needs.
3. Help teachers obtain the resources they need to be successful.
4. Provide time for professional interaction among teachers.
5. Recognize teachers as team colleagues. Involve them meaningfully in school decisionmaking. Incorporate time for training/research and participation in decisionmaking.
6. Study the organization's use of instructional space and ensure that the facility is used to the best advantage of students. Involve teachers in decisions about facility use. When new facilities are planned, involve teachers during the design stage.
7. Involve parents and community members in school-based decisionmaking.
8. Assess and evaluate school programs and policies regularly, particularly in regard to communications, teacher support systems, and professional development.

Division Administrators

1. Select principals who have the qualities needed to work effectively with others.
2. Provide continuous training in effective leadership practices for principals.

3. Assess and evaluate parent/community involvement and expectations.

4. Assess effectiveness of internal and external communication and support systems.

5. Examine personnel policies regarding teacher transfers and assignments.

6. Ensure that sufficient funds are available to meet instructional needs throughout the year, particularly for consumable resources and supplementary material.

7. Support professional development for teachers by providing reimbursement for college tuition and released time for professional development opportunities.

8. Assess and evaluate school programs regularly.

9. Improve school facilities. Consider windows that open rather than climate controlled buildings. Relinquish control of thermostats.

State Policymakers

1. Visit schools and listen to teachers. Improve communication with educator associations concerning education issues and actions.

2. Restructure school funding to alleviate disparities in educational facilities and resources among regions of the state.

3. Provide funding for teacher recertification efforts.

4. Establish policies that will decrease class size and provide consistency in teacher-pupil ratio across all classes.

5. Move schools into the 21st century through increased use of educational technology in the classroom. Provide appropriate equipment, resources, and training for teachers.

6. Decentralize and encourage school-based, participatory decisionmaking.

Background of the Study

AEL seeks to provide professional development opportunities to educators by working with and through their associations. Since 1985, one way that the Classroom Instruction (CI) program staff have assisted associations is through the creation of study groups to assist educators in conducting and using research.

A study group is composed of educators who are organized to conduct a study on an educational issue and who produce a product that is useful to their colleagues. Associations and AEL jointly select topics for study groups, although member selection is completed by associations. AEL staff participate in meetings as members of the study group, usually taking a facilitative role and handling all communications for the group. VEA's Instruction and Professional Development (IPD) director assists in facilitating group meetings and aids in writing and reviewing sections of each VEA-AEL study group product. AEL provides a small grant to aid the work of the study group, but the in-kind contributions that the association and individual members often make far exceed AEL's grant.

The responsibility for dissemination lies with both AEL and VEA. AEL provides dissemination to the other three states (Kentucky, Tennessee, and West Virginia) in its Region, while VEA announces and disseminates the project in Virginia. AEL often provides a small grant to assist with the dissemination of the product or to sponsor opportunities for study group members to share the findings of their study at state or regional conferences.

Planning the Study

Acute budget problems faced by local school boards, accountability measured in terms of performance outcomes, and state-level initiatives to restructure K-12 education in Virginia served as impetuses for this study. While one could ask teachers to share details of their professional work environment, the VEA found almost no statewide data about teacher working conditions. When local budgets tighten, thoughts of improving working conditions are often put on hold as districts (termed divisions in Virginia) attempt to maintain teacher and textbook levels. To measure teacher perceptions of working conditions, the VEA in early 1991 began two research studies.

The first study involved a "Survey of Teachers' Satisfaction with Working Conditions" (see Appendix A) consisting of 78 questions developed and validated by the National Education Association's Research Division. VEA Research staff mailed the survey in February 1991 to 500 randomly selected teacher members and subsequently sent four followup mailings to increase the response rate (60% response rate achieved). VEA staff concluded that while the survey data could provide information on working conditions statewide, a qualitative methodology would offer a richer description of differences in conditions between regions of the state. The VEA IPD director suggested a qualitative study of teacher working conditions as the topic for the 1991 VEA-AEL study group.

Both VEA and AEL staff agreed that the study could result in a publication with anecdotal information useful for educators in each region of the state, as well as recommendations for legislators and the Department of Education for needed improvements in working conditions statewide. The qualitative study results, it was felt, would more thoroughly describe the status of working conditions, as well as provide experience in qualitative research for study group members.

VEA and AEL staff reviewed qualitative methodologies and selected the focus group interview to be conducted by study group members in each of seven

regions of Virginia (see map of regions included as Appendix C). For this study, Virginia Education Association (VEA) members applied to become study group members in response to an announcement of the project in the February 1991 *Virginia Journal of Education*, a VEA publication. Applicants completed descriptions of their previous interviewing and writing experiences, attached samples of their writing, and developed rationale statements regarding their interest in the quality of teacher working conditions. Nine successful applicants from throughout Virginia were notified of their selection as study group members.

Conducting the Study

At the initial meeting of the study group in March 1991, members reviewed the NEA survey, were trained in focus group interviewing by an AEL trainer, and drafted the moderator's guide (questions) for the focus group interview based upon their review of the NEA survey items. This two-day training session also provided time for skill practice in question development and in conducting the interview with feedback from other members. Study group members then field tested the focus group interview with colleagues in their divisions and shared their field notes and tapes at their April meeting. Based upon their reflections, the final moderator's guide (see Appendix B) was developed and provided, along with a cassette audiotape, to study group members.

Enclosed in the original survey mailing to 500 VEA members was an invitation to participate in a regional focus group interview on the quality of teacher working conditions (see Appendix D). This technique, plus additional recruiting by VEA UniServ directors in some areas of the state, resulted in the participation of between five and nine teachers in each of the regional interviews. Interviewees volunteered their time, approximately four hours, and received a dinner or lunch during the session and a copy of this publication. VEA staff arranged interview sites and facilitated four of the seven regional interviews held prior to the May study group meeting. AEL staff facilitated three group interviews. Both VEA and AEL staff took field notes and supervised taping of the interviews.

Study group members met in June 1991 to review field notes and tapes of the seven interviews, to outline their final publication and assign tasks, and to receive training in data analysis and reporting. Individual study group members, or in two regions pairs of study group members, then used their field notes, the facilitator's field notes, and audiotapes of their interviews to develop regional summaries of teacher working conditions. VEA and AEL staff authored all other sections. Study group members peer edited all sections prior to AEL staff's melding of all sections to form a final draft.

The VEA president and IPD director, in addition to study group members and an AEL writer, edited this final version of the publication. An external expert in teacher working conditions also critiqued the document prior to the incorporation of all changes by AEL staff. AEL staff then typeset the group's final work, developed announcement fliers for use by AEL and VEA, and provided camera-ready masters of the publication and fliers to VEA and to AEL's Resource Center for dissemination.

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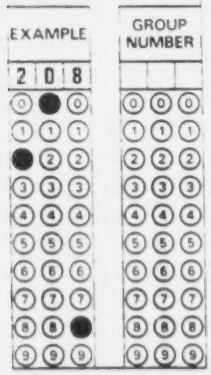
APPENDICES

SURVEY OF TEACHERS' SATISFACTION WITH WORKING CONDITIONS

A SERVICE OF NEA RESEARCH

Write in your assigned GROUP NUMBER and darken the corresponding numbered circle.



This survey of teachers' working conditions concerns the goals, objectives, priorities, and expectations influenced by school administrators that ultimately affect classroom teachers. Your association will use the results to identify trouble spots that need attention, to determine what can be done, and to improve school practices. No individuals will be identified in any report of the data.

Terminology: Wherever the term my supervisor appears, it refers to the building-level administrator who is your direct supervisor, e.g., principal or department head. (If you are an itinerant teacher — i.e., working regularly in several different school buildings — answer these items as if they refer to the supervisor who performs your evaluations.) For high school teachers wherever the term my school appears, it refers to your department.

If the question is not applicable to your teaching situation, leave it blank. For each item please darken the letter that most closely matches your feelings. There are no right or wrong answers. Before you begin to answer the survey, write in your assigned school group number in the boxes as shown in the example.

DIRECTIONS

- Use a NO. 2 PENCIL only.
- Do not use ink or ballpoint pen.
- Darken in the circle completely.
- Erase cleanly any marks you wish to change.
- Do not make any stray marks on this form.
- Do not fold or mutilate this form.

KEY: A = Strongly Disagree; B = Disagree; C = Sometimes Disagree/Sometimes Agree; D = Agree; E = Strongly Agree

1. There are explicit rules for student behavior at this school. (A B C D E)
2. **Teachers in this school have a clear set of instructional goals that provide a sense of purpose in their daily efforts.** (A B C D E)
3. Rules and procedures for using the district curriculum are rigid and inflexible. (A B C D E)
4. **All support staff are made to feel a part of our school's goals.** (A B C D E)
5. I have enough textbooks to give one to every student in my class(es). (A B C D E)
6. **I can go for days without talking to any other colleague about my teaching.** (A B C D E)
7. There are teachers at this school who show leadership by motivating colleagues to try new teaching ideas or strategies. (A B C D E)
8. **Staff development activities at this school are planned without teacher involvement.** (A B C D E)
9. I don't seem to have as much enthusiasm about my work as I did when I began teaching. (A B C D E)
10. **A typewriter or word processor is readily available for my use at school.** (A B C D E)
11. Teachers view classroom visits by the school supervisor as a constructive experience. (A B C D E)
12. **It's impossible to feel successful with some of my students.** (A B C D E)
13. I have many opportunities to learn new things that affect the ways that I teach. (A B C D E)
14. **Rules for student behavior are consistently applied at this school.** (A B C D E)
15. Duplicating equipment with sufficient paper and supplies is readily available. (A B C D E)
16. **Teachers in my school discuss why a technique worked or did not work in a particular class.** (A B C D E)
17. Although we have computers at school to help manage paperwork demands, we have not received sufficient training to use them. (A B C D E)
18. **Teachers here share a sense of responsibility for our school's successes or failures.** (A B C D E)
19. A student's performance in school depends on so many outside factors (e.g., parents' education, student motivation) that a teacher can have only limited influence. (A B C D E)
20. I have convenient access to a free private telephone at school. (A B C D E)
21. **The methods used in evaluating my teaching performance seem objective and fair.** (A B C D E)
22. At my school there is a system of help and support that we use for new teachers. (A B C D E)
23. **Sometimes I have to work around school rules in order to do what I think needs to be done for my students.** (A B C D E)
24. Parents help teachers and school staff provide better educational services. (A B C D E)
25. **In my experience, evaluation is not intended to help teachers improve.** (A B C D E)
26. Most teachers take no helpful action when a colleague is having classroom problems. (A B C D E)
27. **I have a classroom of my own where I can adequately organize my teaching program.** (A B C D E)
28. My school organizes activities and programs that involve parents in helping their children learn. (A B C D E)
29. **We have explicit goals for student learning in this school.** (A B C D E)
30. My supervisor discourages teachers from experimenting with new ideas or strategies. S/he likes to keep things the way they are. (A B C D E)
31. **The learning needs of students are the subject of teacher talk.** (A B C D E)
32. No matter what I do, some of my students don't seem to make any academic progress. (A B C D E)
33. **I have no problem in getting support and help from the parents of my students.** (A B C D E)
34. Teachers' conversations could be characterized as "gripe sessions." (A B C D E)
35. **In this school the entire staff supports the learning objectives we're trying to achieve with students.** (A B C D E)
36. Teachers at this school are not comfortable telling or asking others how to teach a difficult concept or objective. (A B C D E)
37. **The criteria used in evaluating my teaching performance seem objective and fair.** (A B C D E)
38. Most teachers do not care to talk about teaching techniques or instruction when they get together during school hours; they need a break from education. (A B C D E)

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OVER →

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KEY: A = Strongly Disagree; B = Disagree; C = Sometimes Disagree/Sometimes Agree; D = Agree; E = Strongly Agree

39. I cannot make any change in my curriculum until a supervisor approves it. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)
40. There are teachers at this school who show leadership by being exemplary academic models for other teachers. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)
41. My supervisor does not seem to be aware of innovative teaching techniques/materials. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)
42. Students can learn any material if teachers present it properly. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)
43. This faculty is characterized by cliques and factions. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)
44. To gain parents' understanding and support, they are kept informed about rules for student conduct and our instructional programs. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)
45. I have enough chairs, desks, and other equipment in my classroom for my students. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)
46. There are teachers at this school who show leadership by helping colleagues solve difficult teaching problems. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)
47. At this school computers help us manage paperwork demands, student testing, etc. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)
48. Most teachers in this school are not interested in what I do in my classroom. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)
49. In this school I can take little action until a supervisor approves it. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)
50. I am tired of extending myself beyond the basic requirements of my job—it's simply not rewarding at this school. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)

PLEASE GIVE YOUR OWN CANDID PERCEPTIONS OF THE FREQUENCY WITH WHICH THE FOLLOWING OCCUR IN YOUR TEACHING SITUATION. DARKEN THE LETTER THAT MOST CLOSELY MATCHES YOUR PERCEPTIONS.

KEY: A = Never; B = Seldom; C = Sometimes; D = Frequently; E = Always

51. Teachers at this school participate in deciding what should be taught. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)
52. New teachers here are assigned a mentor to help them get started with their teaching. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)
53. My supervisor encourages teachers to work together to develop ideas/strategies/materials. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)
54. I am encouraged to modify the curriculum to meet individual students' needs. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)
55. Parents of my students initiate contact with me when they feel it is important to the interests of their children. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)
56. When a teacher at this school is not doing a good job, other teachers ignore the problem. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)
57. Teachers and supervisors at my school work together to solve instructional problems. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)
58. My supervisor gives me frequent, specific suggestions that are useful in improving my teaching. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)
59. Other teachers at this school come to me for help or advice when they need it. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)
60. Teachers at this school participate in selecting instructional texts and materials. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)
61. My supervisor structures opportunities for teachers to work with each other so they can learn new skills and techniques. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)
62. My supervisor enforces school rules for student behavior. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)
63. My supervisor provides suggestions, materials, or support staff to help me become the most effective teacher I can be. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)
64. Teachers at this school participate in determining appropriate instructional methods and techniques. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)
65. I converse with other teachers about teaching and learning. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)
66. My supervisor encourages me to try out new teaching ideas. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)
67. Rules for student behavior are always changing at this school. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)
68. I think about transferring to another school. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)
69. My supervisor involves teachers in finding solutions to school problems. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)
70. When a teacher is experiencing classroom difficulties, my supervisor refers that teacher to a helpful colleague. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)
71. Teachers here experiment with new ideas. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)
72. I feel the need to take "mental health" days. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)
73. My supervisor works with teachers in formulating and reviewing objectives. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)
74. Teachers in my school encourage each other to try out new ideas. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)
75. My supervisor spends time with new teachers, orients them, and helps them feel welcome. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)
76. Teachers and supervisors work together here to identify student discipline procedures and rules to help solve discipline problems. (A) (B) (C) (D) (E)

KEY: For Questions 77 and 78, Use the Individual Keys Provided

77. I regularly ask for assistance from or offer assistance to the following number of teachers:

A = No Other Teachers
B = One Teacher
C = Two Teachers
D = Three Teachers
E = Four Teachers
F = Five or More Teachers

(A) (B) (C) (D) (E) (F)

78. Suppose you could go back to your college days and start all over again. In view of your present knowledge, would you become a teacher?

A = Certainly Would Not
B = Probably Would Not
C = Chances About Even
D = Probably Would
E = Certainly Would

(A) (B) (C) (D) (E)

Thank You For Participating In This Survey.

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VEA-AEL Study Group
Quality of Teacher Working Conditions
Focus Group Interview
Moderator's Guide

Introductions

Introduce yourself and state your position, school, and division. Explain the following: background of the VEA-AEL study, relationship to the VEA survey of teacher working conditions, reason for focus group interview, the participant's importance to the study, the confidentiality and aggregation of data, final reporting of the responses by region and across the state in a joint VEA-AEL publication, and thanks for their participation. Discuss the length of the session and dinner, procedures for questions/responses and seeking clarity, and expectations you have for their active involvement in the session. Explain that you will be tape recording and that your facilitator (introduce her), will be taking notes. Assure participants that these will be used by you only in developing a summary for the region to be included in the final publication. Ask if anyone has objections to tape recording of the session. Any participant who has objections may review the tape at the conclusion of the interview or may choose not to participate in the interview and leave at this point. Explain that you will be asking for their feedback on the experience of being a focus group interview participant at the conclusion.

Ask participants to reflect for a few moments and to note on their note pads their response to this question, "What two or three words best describe teacher working conditions in your school?" Begin participant introductions by asking them to in turn state their name, position, school, and division and the two or three words they noted.

Warm-up

Move from introductions to warm-up; explaining that you will be asking questions about several aspects of teacher working conditions. To begin you would like to know, "What has had the greatest impact on working conditions for you?"

Cluster Questions--Explain that each cluster of questions proceeds from general to more specific questions. You may want to briefly review the names of clusters for participants. Please attempt to use all clusters and questions.

Resource/Instructional Material Quality and Quantity, Selection

1. How satisfied are you with the quantity and quality of your instructional materials? (Probe, if necessary).

2. Do you have to alter your teaching because of tne lack of available resources? How does the availability or unavailability of instructional materials affect your teaching?

3. Describe your involvement in the selection of materials.

4. What would you change, if anything, about the selection process of resource/instructional materials.

Environment-Facilities and Class Size

1. How does the physical environment at your school (e.g. adequacy/flexibility of instructional space, availability of equipment, etc.) help or hinder instruction?

2. How would you describe class size, on average, at your school? What effect does class size have on teacher and student performance?

Professional Development

Professional development experiences, for the purposes of this study, are defined as inservice education sessions (whether voluntary or required, division- or school-based), workshops or training sponsored by professional organizations, and personally designed and implemented professional growth activities. Please consider all of these opportunities as you respond to the following questions.

1. How would you evaluate the adequacy of the number and types of professional development opportunities offered by your school or division? Please explain.

2. How would you respond to the statement, "I am encouraged in/discouraged from participating in professional development activities. Please cite examples or incidents that illustrate this.

3. Specifically, please describe your ability to get professional leave to attend conferences, present workshops, observe other teachers, or participate in other professional development activities.

4. Describe your involvement in the selection and planning of professional development for you or others.

5. What opportunities are available to you to use and share information from professional development sessions you attend?

Interactions--Teachers are involved in hundreds of interactions with others during every school day and frequently mention the importance of interactions to the quality of their working conditions. The following sections of the Interactions cluster deal with three types of teacher interactions: teacher with teacher (including specialists and aides), teacher with administrator (school principal), and teacher with students.

Teacher with Teacher

1. When and where do you talk with fellow teachers? What do you usually talk about?

2. What kinds of support do you get from or give to other teachers?

3. How has your teaching changed as a result of teacher-teacher interactions in your school?

4. How have policies or practices at your school changed as a result of teacher-teacher interactions?

Teacher with Administrator

1. What word best characterizes your principal? Explain why you chose this term.

2. In what ways does your principal interact with teachers in your school?

3. How satisfied are you with your relationship with your principal? What behaviors by him/her cause you to feel this way?

4. Does your principal recognize and meet the needs of your faculty? Please share some example behaviors which show this.

Teacher with Student

1. How would most students describe their feelings about attending your school?

2. How would you describe the relationship between teachers and students at your school?

3. What level of expectations do teachers hold for student achievement and behavior at your school? How can you tell?

School-Parent/Community Interaction and Involvement

1. In what ways do parents and community members participate or communicate with your school?

2. How satisfied are you with the extent and kinds of involvement your faculty and you have with parents or community members? Please explain.

3. Describe some ways that you communicate with parents of the children you teach.

4. Has parent/community involvement affected student performance? If so, please describe in what ways.

School Goals and Objectives

Goals, as referred to in this study, include stated and unstated goals, personal professional goals and goals you hold for students, as well as school goals, philosophies, and mission statements. Goals may be for academic purposes, holistic development of the child, school-based excellence or otherwise broad or narrow in their scope. Please tell us about yours by responding to the following questions.

1. How are goals and objectives developed and communicated at your school? Who is involved in goal development?

2. Do decisions made at your school reflect a shared set of goals and objectives? Please explain.

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3. Please agree or disagree with the following statement and explain your answer. I feel a sense of responsibility for my school's successes and failures.

School Decisionmaking and Change

The ways in which decisions about policies and practices are made differ among schools. Change in schools also varies widely among administrators, faculties, and communities. This cluster asks you to consider how change happens at your school and how decisions above the classroom level are made.

1. Can you describe a recent change at your school? If so, please describe how this change came about. Was this process typical of how changes occur? Why or why not?

2. Describe teacher involvement in decisionmaking at your school.

3. What decisions are you involved in making? In what areas have other teachers been involved in decisionmaking?

4. In what ways, if any, would you change the way decisions are made at your school?

Personnel policies and practices

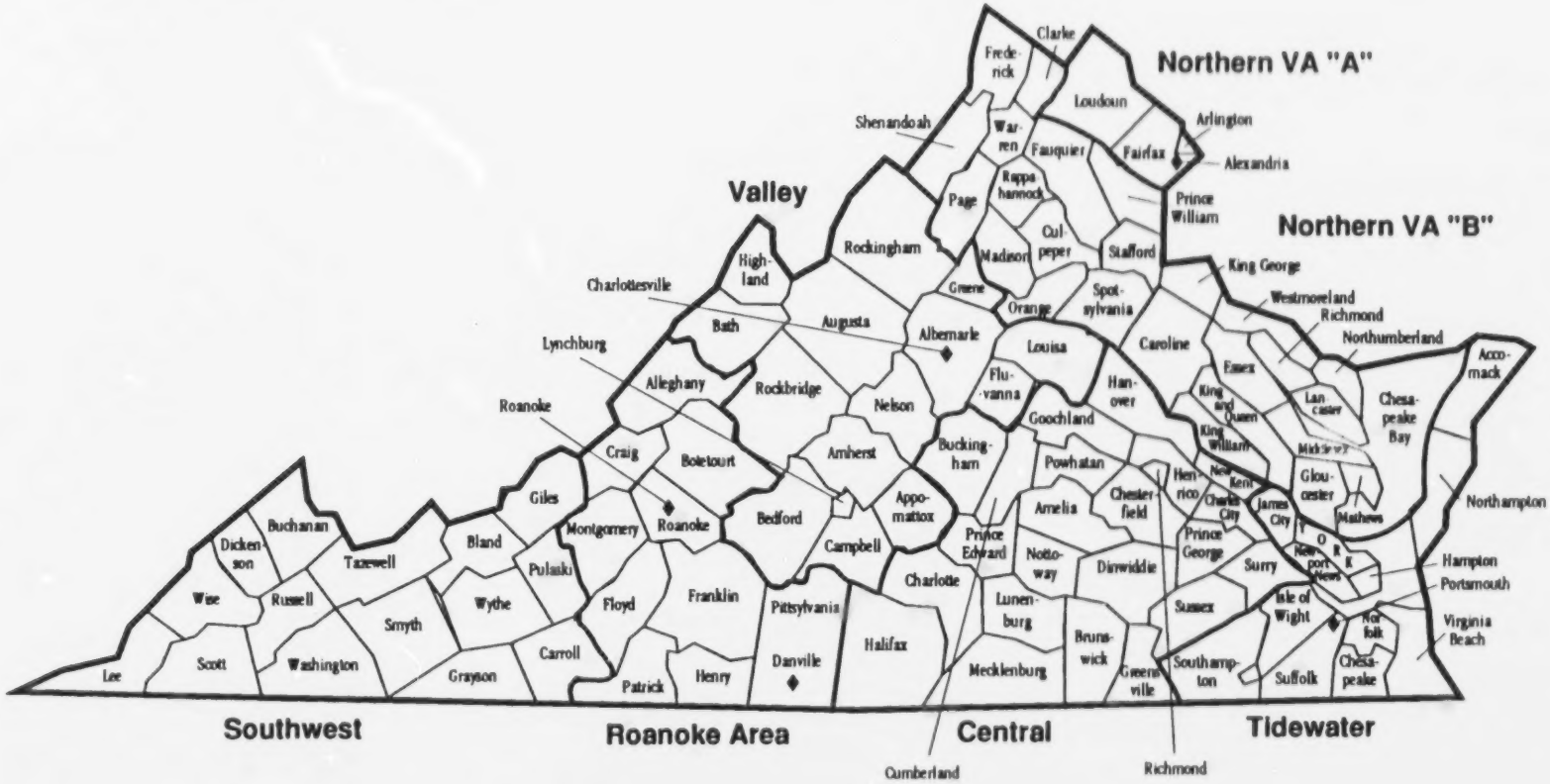
Personnel policies and the manner in which they are enforced can influence your opinion of your work environment. So that we may understand how they affect teachers in this region, please respond to the following question about your school and division.

How does the implementation of personnel policies affect your working conditions?

Thank participants for their involvement and explain that you have one final question that may help them to summarize their perceptions of teacher working conditions. Then ask each to reflect and respond to this request: "Complete this statement: When I get up to go to work in the morning, my attitude is_____, because_____."

Explain that since focus group interviewing is new to you and to most teachers, you would appreciate hearing their comments about participation in this interview. How did they find the experience?

Ask participants if they have any questions and respond or request that they contact VEA. Explain again that the final publication will anonymously discuss grouped findings for each region and across the state and that no interview participant will be identified. Announce that the final report should be available upon request from VEA and AEL beginning in late fall 1991. Thank you for your help. See you May 21, 10 a.m.-3:30 p.m. in Richmond. Please bring your notes and taped interview.



Commonwealth of Virginia
Focus Group Interview Regions
Counties and Independent Cities (with population more than 40,000)

Appendix C

VIRGINIA EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

VIRGINIA JOURNAL of Education

Gamble's Hill, 116 South Third Street, Richmond, Virginia 23219-3799

TO: Certain VEA Members

FROM: Helen Rolfe, VEA Director of Instruction and Professional Development
Jane Hange, AEL Director of the Classroom Instruction Project

DATE: January 30, 1991

SUBJECT: Study of the Quality of Teacher Working Conditions

Because of your selection to participate in the VEA survey of teacher working conditions, you are also eligible to participate in a related study cosponsored by the VEA and the Appalachia Educational Laboratory that will result in a report published by both organizations.

In our follow-up study we will be interviewing groups of teachers who responded to the survey from each of the seven Superintendents' Regions. These focus group interviews will be conversations about such issues as class size, professional development opportunities, teacher interactions and other concerns that impact on teaching and learning. All information gained in the interviews will be grouped by region and no district or individual identification will be used in reporting. Data, such as audiotapes of the group interviews, will be used only for this study.

About 70 teachers, 10 per region, will be interviewed. Participation requires no advance preparation on your part. The 3- to 4-hour meeting, held in your region, will begin at about 4 p.m. and include dinner. The interview will be set up to take place sometime in the period from mid-April to mid-May.

We invite you to respond on the attached tear sheet, including it in the envelope with your completed survey, or sending it separately, if you prefer. We will select the first 10 respondents in each region for the study, and will acknowledge all responses by mail. It would be most helpful to hear from you by February 22.

We look forward to working with you and hope you'll enjoy being part of this professional conversation.

I am interested in participating in the follow-up study on teacher working conditions. Please contact me about the focus group interview in my region.

Name_____ Local Assoc._____
School (indicate elem., mid. or h.s.)_____
Home Address_____
Home Phone_____ School Phone_____

Return to VEA, 116 S. 3rd St., Richmond, VA 23219.

Funded by

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U.S. Department of Education